The Singing Garden 1

Psalms of Wisdom

Psalm 1

September 13, 2020

North UMC

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

This morning begins our series on the Book of Psalms. For centuries, believers have read and sung these psalms to affirm their faith, comfort their souls, and express their pain. Even Jesus used the psalms as part of his prayers, such as Psalm 22 which he quoted while being crucified, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” No surprise, then, that Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, said that “the Book of Psalms is like a garden containing things of all these kinds, and it sets them to music.”

For the next seven weeks we will spend time in this “singing garden.” Like a garden, there are a variety of different types of psalms and each week we will examine the different types. To help you find your way through this musical garden, we have prepared a study guide. You can use is for personal use, do it with your family, or join one of our small groups that will start meeting this week.

My goal is simple: I want everyone to read one psalm every day between now and the end of October. A psalm a day. A list of daily psalms is in the study guide as well as each day on the church’s social media platforms. Reading a psalm a day is an ancient and profound practice. Believers have been doing this for centuries. In the monastic tradition, for example, all 150 psalms are read each month! We will only be doing a third of them during our seven week experiment. What believers of every generation have found is that this simple act deepens your faith. Little by little, the repetition of reading the psalms reshapes our perspective and reforms our emotions. It does not happen all at once, but like a flower growing in a garden, reading the psalms fertilizes good spiritual growth of the soul.

WISDOM PSALMS

We begin our series this morning at the beginning, Psalm 1. And the first psalm is a song of wisdom. The Bible contains different kinds of writings, one of which is wisdom literature. There are entire books of the Bible, such as Proverbs and Job, that are wisdom literature. In the Book of Psalms, there are entire psalms that are wisdom psalms and other psalms are composed of wisdom literature along with other forms. Even though Psalm 1 does not use the word, the theme that starts the entire book is wisdom.

What is wisdom? Wisdom is a characteristic of God. God created the world with wisdom, as it says in Proverbs 8. Because God is love, wisdom that made and sustains creation is good and right and life-giving. The wise God designed the cosmos with a moral fabric or as Martin Luther King, Jr. would say, “the arch of the universe bends toward justice.”

The wise Creator gives us the law so that we can understand this moral fabric. The law shows us how to conform our behavior to this moral fabric. Law and creation go together. When we obey the law we are in right relationship with the moral order of the Creator. This is why Psalm 1 calls the wise “righteous”, we are acting in harmony with God’s right ordering of life.

The wisdom of God is manifested in Jesus Christ. He is the embodiment of divine wisdom in his right relationships with others. We see God’s wisdom in how Jesus treated others and in Jesus’ acts to restore the moral order of our lives and all creation and in his acts to restore life.

Wisdom puts us in harmony with the life and love of God that is part and parcel of all creation.

Wisdom is not the same as knowledge. A person can be very knowledgeable about facts and theories, a person can be an expert in a subject, but that does not mean they are wise about how to use that knowledge and for what purpose to use that knowledge. In our culture, we make a false assumption that just because someone has intellectual abilities that they will act morally and have integrity. We are not surprised when a homeless man commits a crime but we are always shocked and surprised with the university professor is accused of sexual harassment or the CEO is guilty of embezzlement.

Wisdom is moral discernment and moral courage. Just because a person has a string of letters after their name does not mean that they will demonstrate discernment and courage in the face of evil. Case in point: Gerhard Kittel was a noted New Testament scholar whose academic work is still used today in biblical studies. And yet, for all his intellectual capabilities, he was an earlier supporter of the Nazi party and even when he tried to distance himself politically from Hitler, his lectures on Jews and scripture gave legitimacy to anti-Semitism.

Wisdom is not the same as technique. We Americans prize the builder, the engineer, the entrepreneur because they get things done. Wisdom is a skill of sorts because wisdom is learned through practice. It is through obedience to God’s way and will that we become wise. We apprentice in wisdom under God’s direction. But wisdom is not a technique for gaining what we want. Wisdom only serves our allegiance to God—“Fear (reverence) of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” so said Proverbs. Not so with a technique. A technique can serve any purpose. A carpenter is skilled at building but those construction skills can be used to build affordable housing or a concentration camp. Wisdom can only build life and love because wisdom comes from the God of life and love.

Now more than ever, we need wisdom. We need wise people to lead our nation, our communities, our churches. We need wisdom to know how to do the right thing and to have the courage to do it in our workplaces, our schools, our homes, our neighborhoods. We need wisdom.

As Psalm 1 says, we need more trees. Being wise is like a tree in three ways.

PLANTED

One, being wise means being planted. The psalmist wrote, “that person is like a tree planted by streams of water.” Being wise means being planted in God’s wisdom. A tree has deep and extensive roots that support its growth. A tree often lives a long time. A tree does not move. One could say, like a person, the tree has integrity. We need to be planted in God’s wisdom so that we are persons of integrity.

The wise are like trees planted by “streams of water.” They are near the resource that will sustain the life of the tree. We are wise to plant ourselves near the Living Water, Jesus who is the embodiment of divine wisdom. We need that constant spiritual connection to maintain our integrity. We cannot do it on our own. The psalmist tells us that meditating on God’s ways—the law—provides us with God’s wisdom to share our integrity. This is why we will be reading the psalms every day.

There was a huge weeping willow tree on the back part of my great grandmother’s land. It was wider than you reach your arms around. My grandfather had planted decades earlier from two twigs he had gotten from a friend and from what was little more than a stiff weed grew a huge tree. Why? Because it was planted in the right location. It was located near water.

We water our roots when we focus our lives on the ways of God. The psalmist said that the righteous person “takes delight in the law of the Lord and on God’s law they meditate day and night.” Wisdom is developed by looking for God’s moral order, by learning the law of God that we read about in the Old Testament, and following the example Jesus. We examine, focus, prioritize God’s ways; we meditate on God’s law. We do not become wise by meditating on other ways. We do not become wise by fixating on, scheming about, or imitating the ways of others.

When we are planted, we can stand up to pressure. Being planted means that we have integrity to stay true to God’s core values when the situation tempts us to compromise. Wisdom gives us the moral clarity that enables us to have moral courage to withstand the pressure from others to do the wrong thing. Wisdom gives us the passion and clarity to speak up and wisdom gives us the words to say, the way to say it, and the timing for it to be said.

Are you planted? Are you centering your life in the will and way of God so that you can be a person of integrity and moral courage?

PLIABLE

Two, being wise means being pliable. We are willing to hear criticism and adapt to changes. We are constantly learning and reflecting. The trees that last are pliable to move in a storm and not let the wind snap them in two.

Being pliable means meditating on God’s law. Meditation is not memorization. I can memorize the Ten Commandments but that does not mean I have meditated on their meaning and application. I can learn the rules for the purpose of looking for loopholes that I can exploit. Meditating on God’s law means that we are relearning and reevaluating how to apply God’s ways to our contemporary and complex situation. Meditation keeps us planted in God’s wisdom so that we can be pliable to respond to every situation.

Pliability is part of integrity. Integrity is more than consistency. You can be consistently evil, consistently mean, consistently greedy, but that has no moral integrity. Having integrity means being planted in your core values while being able to adapt them to the situation and discerning what is not essential that you can change.

Pliability is part of our integrity when we are pliable with God. We must be pliable in the hands of God, willing to change and adapt according to God’s direction and for God’s life-giving, love-fulfilling purposes.

This is hard to do especially when you have worked hard at being planted in God’s wisdom. You have wrestled with a difficult decision. You have meditated on what God wants you to do and determined a course of action. And then the situation changes. Then, you must be willing to reevaluate what you thought was God’s will all the while you are attempting to remain true to those core values. Being pliable in those situations can fool your emotions, it can feel like you are not being planted.

Wisdom makes us pliable like a live oak. The wise are like a live oak rather than a pine tree in a storm. After Hurricane Hugo devastated the South Carolina coast, we flew into Charleston. As we made our descent, everywhere you looked there were uprooted pine trees, hundreds of them, and thousands more were snapped in two. It was as if Hugo was a giant who had walked through the Low Country pulling them up by their roots and broke them across his knee. However, the live oaks were intact. The live oaks, which were hundreds of years older than the pines, had all weathered the storm. Why? Because they had a more extensive root system and their twisted old limbs were pliable. They could move with the wind.

Are you pliable? Are you sufficiently planted in God’s wisdom to bend with the needs of the moment without being uprooted in your core values?

PRODUCTIVE

Three, being wise means being productive. The psalmist continues the simile: “That person is like a tree….which yields its fruit in season.” We need wisdom to make us productive. Just as a tree needs a good root system drawing plenty of water to produce fruit, we cannot be productive if we are not planted in wisdom.

The very nature of wisdom is to bear good fruit. Wisdom results in giving life. Wisdom builds up the common good of society. We are not productive for our own well-being. We are not productive simply to amass wealth and luxury for our own pleasure and security. The God of wisdom is a generous God and so wisdom is God’s directive on how to distribute our productivity.

Do you remember the apple trees in *The Wizard of Oz*? When Dorothy picked an apple the tree demanded she give it back. We are not to be like those trees, but to give and allow others to find God’s generous love through us.

It may take a while, the psalmist explains that we yield fruit in due season. We may not be able to see the fruits of our faithfulness now. It may take a while. This is hard for us in the age of instant gratification. God has a season for each of us to bear the best fruit. Until then, we must not be like the apple trees of Oz.

Planted. Pliable. Productive. The wise “are like a tree planted by streams of water which yield its fruit in season.” One such tree was Dag Hamarskjöld. Hamarskjöld was the Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1953 to 1961. His training and knowledge was in law and finances and had worked for the Swedish Ministry of Finance. He was elected Secretary-General because the Soviets thought he was a wonkish numbers guy who would not raise issues of human rights.

They were wrong about him. During his tenure he attempted to create peace between Israel and Arab nations, the UN sent peacekeepers to intervene in the Suez Crisis, and he worked to defuse the crisis in the newly independent Congo. In September 1960, the Soviet government denounced his decision to send a UN emergency force to keep the peace. They demanded his resignation.

Undergirding his technical knowledge was a spirituality that nourished integrity and courage. He often read the mystics. He ordered and supervised the design of the Meditation Room at the UN. In 1961, while on another peacekeeping visit to the Congo, his plane crashed and he died. Among the wreckage they found his briefcase. There were only three things in it: a copy of the UN Charter, a copy of the New Testament, and a copy of the book of Psalms.

This Fall, let us seek God’s wisdom by meditating on the psalms. Let God plant us in wisdom and make us pliable and productive with wisdom.