

Two Ways Set Before us
Psalms for the Summer - Psalm 1
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Pastor Vern Christopherson

I remember back to Sunday School class in 5th grade. Our teacher, Luella Oie, asked us to take our Bibles and open them up right to the middle. As we did, she said we'd come upon the biggest book of the Bible, the book of Psalms. I've never forgotten Mrs. Oie's teaching that day. As the years have gone on, I've encountered the Psalms, not only in the middle of the Bible, but in the middle of life, giving expression both to the sorrows and joys that mark our days.

For instance, one July morning, four members of my family walked through the mist and fog to Dacau, the concentration camp in Germany where thousands of Jews died. As we made our way to the crematorium, I remember our guide telling us about the Jews of Europe, both adults and children, walking toward the gas chambers and singing the Hebrew Psalms as they went. In the memorial chapel the words to Psalm 130 were inscribed on the walls, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord."

The Psalms reflect the good times, too. Professor Jim Limberg tells a story about a widow, living alone in a small midwestern town. She was talking about her grandchildren, but then suddenly switched to her departed husband. "Then there was Lambert," she said, "but of course he's gone now. He always said the horses plowed best for him because he sang the Psalms to them in Dutch." Limberg writes: "Think of the ingredients in that scene: psalms that originated in Hebrew in Israel, sung in Dutch by the grandson of an immigrant from the Netherlands, as he plowed with horses on the prairie in America."

The Psalms range from the depths of sorrow (Ps 130) to the heights of celebration (Ps 150). They reflect the pain of loneliness (Ps 42) and the joy of community (Ps 133). They invite us to look on as a young family happily gathers around the table (Ps 128) or to overhear the prayer of an elderly person worried about what lies ahead (Ps 71).

The book of Psalms is often referred to as the hymnbook of ancient Israel, but it was more than that. It was also their prayer book. It contained the prayers

that God's people carried in their hearts. Those prayers continue to speak to us, and *for us*.

Lately, I've been reading a book by Anne Lamott entitled: *Help, Thanks, Wow*. The subtitle is: "The Three Essential Prayers." Lamott, in her characteristic brash and colorful style, describes prayer as communication from our hearts to God. She says that we can and should say anything we want to God. Prayer begins with simple, honest conversation. God can handle it.

Lamot shares examples: "When we find ourselves in trouble, we cry out in desperation: "God, *help* me. I'm in a really bad spot right now." Or, when things are going well, we say things like: "*Thanks*. Thanks for my sobriety, for my grandchildren, for the grace to live another day." Finally, when we're watching July 4th fireworks, or celebrating the biggest walleye we've ever caught, or standing in front of El Capitan in Yosemite, the word that tends to fit best is: "Wow! God, you're amazing and so is the world you have given us!" According to Lamott, prayer is a lot easier than we sometimes make it. About the only thing that's hard is remembering to do it. Lamott's book is a reminder to me to pray – yes, pastors need reminders too. Those three little words are a great springboard: *Help, Thanks, Wow*.

Our psalm for today, Psalm 1, is an introduction to the book of Psalms. It lays out two ways that a person can go: the way that leads to happiness and life, and the way that leads to unhappiness and death. Those people who are truly happy, says the psalmist, are like strong, healthy trees. They take delight in the law of the Lord. The word for "law" used by the psalmist is *torah*. It can mean "rules" but it can also mean "teaching" or "instruction." The psalmist seems to be using *torah* in the latter sense. He's saying: "Devote your life to the teachings of the Lord, devote your life to singing and praying the psalms, and you will find happiness."

Friends, let's be honest, we don't do this particularly well. Life gets busy. Work is demanding. There are errands to run, doctors to see, meals to prepare. Email, Facebook, and TV take over. There are so many things to fill up our days. Devoting ourselves to God's teachings might help us drink deeply, it might bring happiness and life, but often it's the furthest thing from our minds.

I see developing the practice of prayer as important. When I was growing up, my dad had to get us up and out the door in the morning. As I've mentioned before, there were eight kids in my family, six of us were still at home when my

mom died. It was a huge burden for my dad to handle the details of everyday life, in addition to serving as pastor in a couple of country churches. The breakfast table at our house was often quite chaotic. Nevertheless, in the middle of the chaos, my dad would take out the Bible and the *Christ in our Home* devotional book. He would read the devotion for the day and end with prayer. The fact of the matter is, I don't remember a single devotion, but I do know that collectively they made a mark on me. They helped me to put down roots and to drink deeply from streams of fresh, clear water.

In the spirit of this practice from my childhood, I have a challenge for you during our sermon series: ***read and reflect on one psalm each day for the next two months.*** I don't have a ready-made list for you—just the psalms we'll be covering on Sunday—but I will offer some suggestions along the way. **Find a time, preferably in the morning, to read the psalm of the day for the first time.** Then, if possible, go back to the psalm a few times throughout the day. If you have a study Bible or another translation, it might provide a helpful perspective. But the important thing is to get started. Meditate on God's teaching day and night. Take delight in it. The psalmist assures us: "It is the way to happiness and life."

There's a second way mentioned by the psalmist, but it's not much of a way at all. If you've ever seen a farmer at harvesttime take a pitch fork and toss grain into the air, then you have a sense of it. The wind blows and separates the grain from the chaff, and all too soon the chaff is gone. The way of the wicked is like that, says the psalmist, here one minute and gone the next, simply blown away by the wind.

Friends, according to Psalm 1, those are the two ways set before us. One leads to happiness and the other to unhappiness. One leads to life and the other to death. Today's psalm underscores the basic importance of being rooted in God and drinking deeply from God's teachings. To underscore this point, Psalm 1 begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet: *alef*. And it ends with the last letter of Hebrew alphabet: *tav*. In other words, this psalm introduces the book of Psalms as the *alef* to *tav*, the A to Z, on how to live a godly life. Walk in this way, says the psalmist, and you will find life.

One of the funerals I did at my interim in the Twin Cities was for a woman named Inez Schwarzkopf. Inez was a woman who played a role in the larger church for both the American Lutheran Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Inez died after a long struggle with Lewy Body Dementia. In my funeral sermon I shared that Inez was a person who drank deeply from God's life-giving water. She believed that all of life is an amazing gift of grace from God.

Inez was pretty much ready for whatever came her way, and often with a spirit of adventure. Once, while doing church work in North Dakota, she ran off the road during a blizzard. Into the ditch she went. Her first response was, "Well, now I'll find out what this is like." She later got pulled out by a kind farmer coming to the rescue with his tractor.

At another time, a harder time, Inez's father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. It was a long and painful struggle. In an article in Scope magazine, Inez admitted that she couldn't sing the last verse of the hymn *Borning Cry*. She wasn't ready to acknowledge the "one more surprise" mentioned in the hymn, the surprise that comes at the end.

Then on the Saturday before Easter in 1987, the children got a call that their father was actively dying. They gathered as soon as possible. They held his hand, offered up prayers, and said goodbye.

This is how Inez described the moment in her Scope article: "Late on that Saturday afternoon...dad took one last breath and then, no more. My brother Merlin closed our father's eyes, and we stood silent around the bed. I sang, then, my voice thin and exhausted, 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him, all creatures here below,' and then stronger, in 'Praise him above ye heavenly host,' knowing, at last, that Dad was there too."

Inez concluded her article: "I don't what heaven is like. Through the gift of faith, taught and nourished in my church, I know it exists, giving meaning to life, even in death. I know that Dad has experienced that 'one more surprise.'"

Friends, sometimes we're going to find ourselves stuck in a ditch or at a bedside of despair, and in lots of other moments too. When those times come, may we be like trees that have drunk deeply from the water of life. May we be ready to pray: *Help, Thanks, Wow*. And may we trust that with God, there is always *one more surprise* to come. Amen.