

Psalm 1  
Happy Are Those  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
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Presbyterian Church gathered in person, and those following along via live stream, good morning. It is really good to be making this next step toward being together again. I want to wish you all a Happy Fourth of July weekend. I hope you were able to enjoy yesterday's holiday with family, friends, and fireworks.

The kids and I are glad to be back home here in Wabash after a few really great weeks of rest and relaxation in Minnesota. We had a terrific time, we took a quick trip to the North Shore along Lake Superior, we met some new friends, reconnected with old friends and family that we don't see often, we read for leisure, and went for bike rides, watched movies, we even learned how to play chess—sort of. It was really a blessing and we're grateful to you for the time to do that.

Now we're back, we're rested, and ready for another big moment. Today is a big day, taking this small, cautious step towards returning is a really significant moment, considering all that we've been through in just a few months-time. I don't know about you, but for me it feels like an absolute eternity since March 8, when we transitioned to online worship. Just take a moment to think of all that has happened in that time—it's absolutely mind boggling, isn't it?

As we begin, I want to once again acknowledge the dedication, resilience, and creativity of this congregation. In such remarkable ways you have stepped up to face new challenges, adapted old ways of doing things to meet new opportunities of digital worship and community, and you have leaned in to caring for one another and being church even when physical presence with one another was not possible, with card showers, digital gatherings, meal preparations, and countless prayers for one another and for our world. I truly believe that the way through this is by the dogged devotion of God's people the Church continuing to face each new challenge with God. That's really all we can do, right?

So, for those of you who are gathered with us online through our YouTube Live Stream, we welcome you. And those who are gathered here in person, I welcome you once again. We are the Church and we'll continue to be the Church, even if it feels a bit like we're cobbling it together.

In thinking about this moment when there really aren't clear answers or a way forward, God invites us into a place in Scripture that speaks to the deep visceral experiential life of God's people. The genre I'm referring to is the Wisdom Literature, the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. And what is important to know about these texts is that if you are coming to the Scriptures to find neat and tidy, conclusive answers,  $a+b=c$ , this is not the part of the bible where you will be totally satisfied. But if you are finding yourself in a time of great joy, or deep sadness and confusion, and you are looking for words that give voice to the experiences of your life—even saying it in a way you were not able to articulate on your own—then you are in the right place.

I think we are in this time together as the Church, and as a people, don't you agree? So for the rest of the summer each Sunday we will be looking together at a Psalm or part of a Psalm that I hope will invite us to look more deeply into God's love and presence, and the experiences we have as his

people living in this world. And when I thought about where to begin, it only made sense to start with Psalm 1 (obvious right?)

So, look with me now at the first three words of Psalm 1. Happy are those.

Would you agree that pretty much everyone wants happiness in their lives? But how is it that we become and grow in happiness? Pick up a magazine, or turn on the tv (actually no, don't turn on the tv, or login to Facebook for that matter) and there all sorts of advice on how to get more happiness in your life. And often what is connected to it are things like, a fancier car, a bigger house, get into the right college, or have the right career or family.

A few years ago, Psychologist Dr Laurie Santos from Yale University began looking at a phenomena she observed in her own students. When the 6% of total applicants found out that they had been admitted to one of the country's most prestigious universities, Yale, there was obviously great celebration and jubilation. But not long after arriving that joy went away...far away. And nowadays not just students and young people, record levels of Americans across the age spectrum experience clinical depression. She said, it seems as though we're doing everything right, but something is not clicking—like something important was missing. Her solution was to develop a new class, that has gone one to become the most popular class not only on Yale's campus but has become an internet phenomenon. The class is called Psychology and the Good Life, it's free online you can take it for yourself.

And what it concludes is that happiness is possible, but we need to go about attaining it the right way. And this, I believe, is where Wisdom literature, and for today specifically Psalm 1 show us the way.

The Psalmist begins by saying “Happy are those, and then goes on to lay out: 1. What happy people don't do; and 2. What a person does do to find happiness. Then right in the middle of this passage in verses 3 and 4 is an image for us to hold onto that will help us understand what is true of people who are content and happy, and what is true of those who are discontent and wicked.

The first image is of a tree in verse 3. They are like trees planted by streams of water.

The geographic setting of this poetic image is of course in the arid rocky, arid terrain of the middle east. If you've been to the Middle East or seen photos you know that there aren't large forests with tall trees growing up into the sky. It's rocky and sparse low growing trees like Olive Trees can survive, but not much else.

If you look at the image of the poet he says three things: first, their leaves do not wither. Normally when we see leaves that are withering (like the roses in my front yard) it's because the land is too hot and there's not enough water. And what the Psalmist is describing in this passage is a tree in this hot and arid climate whose leaves do not wither. And for this to be the case it must have something on the inside that makes it strong. Even when the external environment is extremely hostile, this living thing still has something deep inside it that enables it to thrive and grow.

The next one says it yields its fruit in season. Have you ever tried to grow raspberries or blackberries? Our friends the Cordes family, many of you have gone to pick berries on their farm, I remember when Jared and Erica and their 6 kids, about 6 years ago first started their berry farm. It

was a huge investment, and it didn't start producing berries for about 2 seasons. Blackberries take time to yield fruit. The psalmist says that a person who is happy is like a fruit bearing plant, who bears fruit in its season. Just because a fruit bearing plant doesn't have fruit on it doesn't mean it's not doing ok.

A person who is happy bears fruit, but it doesn't mean they bear fruit all the time. There may be a season where you feel as though your life is not bearing fruit, but what God is saying to us is that you can still find happiness and contentment even in those seasons, because God promises that those who are rooted in his love and kindness will IN TIME bear fruit.

Lastly it says that the person who is happy is one whose life can withstand the elements and who bears fruit in its time, and is able to do so because of where it is planted. Its roots go down into the ground where it is connected to a source of life giving water so that when things get difficult, and the circumstances on the outside seem overwhelming, this plant is able to thrive on the inside and on the outside.

There's a second image, a contrasting image. The Psalmist says that the wicked are like chaff that the wind drives away. Chaff is a familiar image for those who know agriculture. I grew up in the city, this was not familiar to me.

When a farmer in that region has a harvest of wheat, that farmer will gather all of their wheat into a big pile at a place that is elevated on their property. Then in the late afternoon they will take all this wheat that has a kernel in the middle, and a husk on the outside. The farmer takes this gigantic fork and bashes the wheat—it's called threshing. After beating the kernels free from the husk and straw, the farmer throws the whole lot of it up in the air and the good kernels of wheat fall to the threshing floor because they are more dense, and the rest of the mixture of straw and husk is the chaff, and it gets blown away in the afternoon wind. Again, you already knew this I'm sure.

But think with me about the nature of the chaff, the chaff is not connected to anything, it is loose and insecure, and it is entirely at the mercy of the slightest gust of wind.

Now the poet is not just talking about trees and chaff, but he's talking about people. Some people are disconnected, insecure, and entirely at the mercy of the circumstances that blow through their lives. But the image the Bible presents through this poetic picture is a person who is connected to the source of life and nourishment and vitality that enables them to grow strong inside and out, is also someone who is fundamentally happy.

It is true that a happy person will sometimes experience devastating heat and scorching drought, it's also true that a happy person might also be someone who does not have fruit. But because they are connected to a source of living water, they know that in their season they will bear fruit.

I don't know about you, but when I think about this image, the thought that comes to mind is: can I become like that tree? How can I get to be like a tree like that? But before I say anymore I want to caution us because we are dangerously close to turning this psalm into some sort of program to achieve happiness.

Remember when I was telling you about the Happiness course at the beginning of the sermon? I found myself listening this week to the first couple of episodes and the first observation that Dr

Santos observed was that there is a paradox right there on the surface. So many of us think that if we just have lots of money, or we just have the right sports car, or if we finally achieve that hallowed status on Social Media known as “Public Figure”, that we will be happy. It’s actually just the opposite. They state that it is people who are themselves happier, more hopeful, and who have a generally better outlook on life who achieve or receive higher levels of success, higher paying jobs, more opportunities, become “social media influencers.”

So the question the Dr Santos asked was: what practices must we put into practice in order to cultivate greater levels of happiness?

Now, I must admit that even this felt programmatic, if we add a+b we’ll equal c’s outcome. So that, as they recommend, if people get good sleep, cultivate the practice of gratitude and appreciation, if people take time each day to meditate or pray, and if they develop meaningful relationships with family and friends, then they will become happy. And this is understandable, this is a scientific, observable, measurable way of looking at it.

But I believe very deeply that there is an even more fundamental approach one that precedes any program. And that is what enables the taproot to of our lives to grow down and find living water. Faith. Specifically faith in Jesus Christ.

You have heard Jesus use images to describe himself, images like the good shepherd, the living water, the vine to which we are the branches. Well when we seek to find Jesus Christ as he is revealed to us in his Word he promises that these are the sorts of relationships and resources that he will provide for us.

Now if I were to take a straw poll and ask you what the most well-known Psalm is, many of you would say Psalm 23. Psalm 23 offers us another beautiful picture of what it looks like for us to live in faith and in relationship to Jesus Christ. This beautiful image of God as our shepherd has a few important verbs for us to pay attention to: Lie down, leads, walk, dwell. And the reason why I’m drawing your attention momentarily away from Psalm 1 is to place before you a set of contrasting images that will help us understand what it is a happy person does.

1. Follow the advice of the wicked (slandering, liars, out for self interest, greedy, manipulative, cunning, adulterous, etc.)  
A person who lives in faith is someone who is led. That means they have a deep and abiding trust that the person they are following is leading them on a path that will only be for their good. The path where God is leading is beside still/non-anxious waters, waters where trees can sink roots and grow deep.
2. Walk Take the path that sinners tread (they will do what it takes to look out for their own self interest, they will ignore the needs of others, they will cut corners where it benefits them, and they will make the road deliberately hard for others.)  
A person who lives in faith is someone who as they walk through perilous and fearful time when they might be tempted to look for whatever advantage there is in order to get themselves out of it, they will choose to accept that God’s plan for their life is ultimately for their good. And that even though the road is one without fruit, one that might even be surrounded by desolation, that in due season will bring them into a place of bearing fruit.
3. Sit in the seat of scoffers (arrogant, ignore and cast God’s word behind their back, lying, bitter, deceptive, sarcastic)

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. That means that when we walk in faith, even in the midst of the scoffers around us who might mock, ridicule, scoff at our quiet patient enduring faith, we are content and at peace enough in the presence of Jesus to sit and join him at his table—where his cup overflows.

Someone who is happy and who is walking in faith is someone who is able to sit, is able to stand, and is able to follow. And as they do, their life, regardless of its individual circumstance will be characterized by happiness.

Before I close I want to say just a few words about the moment in time in which we find ourselves, and the messages we are receiving from our news and media sources. We are living in a moment of deep hurt and even deeper division in our nation. And it is often not helped by the fact that at every corner of the internet and television is a source clamoring for our attention and advertising dollars saying listen to me, I have the right answer, I have the truth. When in reality much of what we are seeing and hearing is intended to separate us and divide us as a nation and as a human race. And for that, my worry for us is that what we are hearing is wicked, sinful, and scoffing.

Like the happiness study that determined that having more money would not lead to greater levels of happiness, the same temptation exists for seeing the other party lose. We think that if we could just finally put republicans or democrats in their place, or remove them from office then we would be content. But that can never be the source of our identity or contentment.

I implore you, as you consume media, if you find your heart beginning to race and your anger towards what you are hearing rise think carefully whether its intent is just and justice promoting, or whether it is inviting us to join that big seat of scoffers.

Jesus is our good shepherd, he is inviting us to the banquet feast in the kingdom of God. It's a big table, room enough for all. It's a table where the cup overflows to everlasting life, where we can sink roots and grow deep and flourish in due season, and as it says in the old catechism to glorify God and enjoy the gift of his happiness forever. Amen.