

## “Rooted Beside Clear Waters”

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts – Psalm 1 – First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest – May 16, 2021

I have remained awed and impressed by the sheer power of water: from childhood memories of being slammed into the sand while body-surfing at the beach, or seeing the flooding Mississippi from the air, or from walking the neighborhoods of Houston and New Orleans after Hurricanes Harvey and Katrina. Water can be incredibly powerful and destructive—able to carve its way through solid rock! But a lack of water brings with it an even greater destruction to the deprivation and departure of life. Without water, our gardens will wither. Our crops will not bear fruit. And when a person stops drinking it, our end is not far off.

The vital connection between water and life, particularly for folks like us who live next to the largest reservoir of fresh water on the planet, is reinforced again and again when I hike in the desert back-country of San Diego County near the border with Mexico. The rock-strewn hills and canyons are treeless and largely devoid of vegetation, until one comes upon one of the very few places where water can actually be found running on or near the earth’s surface, like in Palm Canyon. Climbing up the twisting defile, the sudden sight of a grove of California Fan Palms, indigenous to the region, waving their green fronds above a blasted landscape in the heat of the day is like a drink of cool water in and of itself. I have soaked my feet in the freshets that tumble among the boulders under the shade of those palms more than a few times, and the experience has always brought with it a blessing of happiness and peace.

I

Our text for this morning is Psalm 1, which, according to ancient Christian commentary acts like the foundation of a house or the keel of a ship in providing support and meaning to the entire collections of Psalms which follow—if not for the whole body of Scripture. *“Happy are those...Blessed are those...”* the psalm states in the very first verse, revealing that what follows is really a Beatitude, just like the eight Beatitudes which begin Christ’s Sermon on the Mount.

*“Happy are those”* who what? What do they have? And what do they do?

First the Psalmist tells us what they don’t do—in three ascending levels of importance. It helps here to read a literal translation from the Hebrew, in this case from the old King James:

*Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful.*

“Walks, stands, and sits.” That’s pretty much what all of us are doing when we’re not sleeping, right? The text offers a warning—and a clear contrast between those who “follow the crowd,” who “hang out with people who do the wrong things,” and worst of all, who “sit down to join them,” confirmed in their wickedness, scornful of God and of those who try to follow God’s commandments. This threefold escalation of “walking, standing and sitting” offers a very clear warning, in stark contrast to what follows in verse two of this psalm.

Unlike the wicked, the one who is blessed delights in *“the law of the Lord.”* That is that? Well, the Ten Commandments come immediately to mind, but so should the larger body of Scripture: the *“law and the prophets,”* as Jesus described the scriptures of the Old Testament. He said he came to fulfill the law. The New Testament names him *“the Word made flesh,”* he who gives us the highest and deepest rendering of God’s Law when he said, *“Love one another as I have loved you”* (Jn. 15:12), or as St. Paul wrote in his Letter to the Galatians, *“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ”* (Gal. 6:2). I believe that meaning is captured in this verse as well.

The Psalmist’s understanding of God’s law is not in order to punish us but to save us: to save us from ourselves. Left to ourselves, we are sure to get it wrong. We lose our grip—and we lose our way. We become scattered, don’t we? Each of us driven by our own desires, scattered like chaff in the wind when the corn is being harvested here in the Midwest.

It is not so for those who are wise enough, and yes—humble enough to acknowledge their need for God. These are the ones who delight in God’s ordering of this beautiful world and who seek to learn more and more about that. They “meditate on it day and night,” the Psalmist says. That might sound awfully religious, but I know quite a few of you sitting here this morning or watching from your homes who do just that. First thing in the morning, over your cup of coffee, you might read a devotional from your smart-phone or even from a real book! And at the end of the day, when you’re settling in for the night, a few more of you will read a psalm or a passage from the Gospels, to refresh your spirit and renew your mind from the business of the day.

The Psalmist has a wonderful, beautiful metaphor for that: *“They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in due season; and their leaves do not wither. In all they do, they prosper.”* This text is repeated almost word for word in the Book of Jeremiah (Jer. 17:8). And in the Book of Proverbs we are told that Wisdom *“is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; whose who hold her fast are called (you guessed it!) happy”* (Pr. 3:18).

So why is the Psalmist talking about trees rooted beside clear waters? Perhaps he (or she) was reflecting on the date palms growing in the desert near Jericho, but a better answer might be this: the story of the Bible itself begins with the Tree of Life which grows in the Garden of Eden,

beside a River that flows out from Paradise to form the four great Rivers of the ancient world. At the end of our Bible, we discover the Tree of Life once more, planted in the New Jerusalem beside the River that flows from the Throne of God and of the Lamb. Its leaves are leaves of healing for the nations, the Bible says. God only knows we need them this morning, as the battle between Israel and the Palestinians rages on.

Halfway through the Bible, between the Garden of Eden and the City of God stands this tree, planted beside the stream. Who does it represent? You. And me. Who planted it? God did. What is keeping it green and fruitful? That stream of clear water—the living Spirit of God.

Trees need quite a lot of water to flourish—and so do people. People need lots of H<sub>2</sub>O. Over 60% of our bodies are made from water—and for our hearts and brains, which number rises to 73%.

People need lots of spiritual water, too. “Living water,” the Bible calls it. Most of us aren’t drinking enough of either. We’re getting parched in body, mind and spirit. Our lives aren’t looking so green.

The answer to our need (like that great big lake over there) is a whole lot closer than we think. Jesus said, *“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me”* (Jn. 7:37). And when he spoke to the Samaritan Woman beside the well, he said, *“If you knew the gift of God, and who it was who is speaking to you...you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water”* (Jn. 4). Where can we drink it today? By coming to Jesus—and by coming to church. How do we receive it? By asking. In prayer.

Today, we have come to the waters of baptism, to participate in the baptisms of Nathanael and Benjamin and to remember and reflect on our own. In this holy Sacrament, Christ has promised to give us living water—the water of the Spirit. He has promised to seal our life in his: from this day forward, until our baptism is complete. No matter what we do or do not do, he has promised to remain with us. And when I reflect up the scope of my own living, I know that he keeps his promises, because he has kept his promise to me.

If the Psalmist and the Prophet say we should be *“like trees planted by streams of clear water,”* St. Paul says that we should *“be rooted and grounded in love”* (Eph. 3:17). That’s what’s happening here today for these two little acorns—Nathanael and Benjamin! With the faith of their parents—and the faith of this church—they’ve been sprinkled by that water; and they’ve been planted by the stream. Rooted and grounded in love, they will grow in Christ and flourish like trees themselves: like *“Oaks of Righteousness, the planting of the Lord”* (Isa. 61:3). And all the while, the clear stream of the Holy Spirit will run near.

## Conclusion

So let me finish by asking you on this fine May morning: *“Where has God planted you?”* *“What is the soil that roots you and grounds you?”* *“Where is the water near your life?”* James Taylor sings a song that says, *“There’s a river running under your feet, Under this house, Under this street, Straight from the heart, Ancient and sweet, On its way back home.”* I think he might be singing about that River of Life, the one that flows out of Eden, and back to the City of God.

*“Happy are those...Blessed are those...”* who are planted near that. Because rooted in Christ’s love, our leaves will not wither. And our lives will bear fruit.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*