

“Two Paths”
Psalm 1
First Sunday in Lent

February 21, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
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I wonder if any of you recall Lewis Carroll’s classic work, *Alice in Wonderland*?

There’s a delightful little exchange in the story between the Cat and Alice.

Cat says to Alice:	Where are you going?
Alice replies:	Which way should I go?
Says the Cat:	That depends on where you are going.
Alice replies:	I don’t know.
Says the Cat:	Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.

Or maybe Yogi Berra put it more succinctly when he remarked:
“If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll end up someplace else.”

Now I have no reason to think that either Lewis Carroll OR Yogi Berra had Psalm 1 in mind when they created those memorable lines, but the first Psalm in our Psalter certainly has an opinion about this topic!

Does it matter where we’re going?
Absolutely, answers the Psalmist!
It matters greatly which way we go.

According to the Psalm 1, there are two ways, two routes, two paths in life:

Path number one is the way that the righteous take,

those whose “delight is in the law of the Lord.”

The second path is taken by “the wicked”—

They are “like chaff that the wind drives away...
the way of the wicked will perish.”

The way of the wicked...and the way of the righteous.

Psalm 1 is asking the question: What makes for a good life?
A faithful and righteous life?

On the one hand, this is most definitely a Psalm about the choices we make in life. Two paths, two roads, one that leads to fruitfulness and flourishing, while the other one leads to peril and perishing...

But BEFORE we get to choices, let’s dig a little deeper into the Psalm.

Because the beauty of this Psalm is that it goes much farther, and gives us an image that’s much richer, than suggesting that we are somehow self-made creatures of choice, in total control of climbing some imaginary ladder of life and worth and success in God’s eyes.

As biblical scholar Bernhard Anderson writes:

“Some may regard this as an ‘achievement’ psalm: the wise person who lives by the Torah is successful, while the one who flouts it is a failure. But this simplistic view hardly does justice to the [psalm].”¹

Anderson is right on target.

This is not a Psalm of ACHIEVEMENT.

¹ Bernhard W. Anderson, with Steven Bishop, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, Louisville: Westminster-John Knox Press, 200.

It is a Psalm of WISDOM.

What makes for a wise and faithful life?

The Psalmist gives us a marvelous image for those who take the RIGHT PATH.

Do you remember the image?

“They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.”

Hold that image in your mind’s eye this morning.
What’s true about the tree that the Psalmist describes?

“They are like trees planted...”—stop right there.

The Hebrew word that gets translated as planted—actually, a more literal translation is “transplanted.”

If something is transplanted, it comes from somewhere, right?
I think what the Psalmist is getting at is this:

There is no way to lead a faithful and fruitful life without knowing where you come from, where your roots are...without knowing what holds you and keeps you grounded, no matter which way the winds might blow.

In his book *Fear No Evil*, the famous Jewish dissident Natan Sharansky describes how the Psalms “saved his life during a long nine-year imprisonment by the KGB.”

Sharansky was in “a constant battle of wills with Soviet authorities, he went on hunger strikes and endured countless hours of interrogation.

“His one possession and constant companion during those hard years was a book of Psalms given to him by his wife...

After nine grueling years...he was finally transported to an airport outside Moscow for his trip to...freedom.

[All this] was choreographed by the Soviets to insure the most favorable exposure for the world press. An official car drove him to the...airport, then to a plane at the far end of the airport.

Photographers were in place when he got out of the car; he was now minutes away from freedom and the end of his...humiliation and suffering.

“Where’s my Psalm book?” he asked.

“You received everything that was permitted,” came the reply.

Sharansky describes the scene:

“I quickly dropped to the snow.

‘I won’t move until you give me back my Psalm book.’

When nothing happened, I lay down in the snow

and started shouting,

‘Give me back my Psalm book!’

The photographers were aghast, and pointed their cameras toward the sky. After a brief consultation the boss gave me the Psalm book.”

Why was it so important to Sharansky?

Though not a particularly religious man, he began reading the psalms [while in prison], even memorizing them.

To his astonishment he found a striking affinity between his experience of bondage and the distresses articulated in many of the psalms. Their prayers of lament became his own and their hope of deliverance became a gleam of light in his cell.

So while he was in prison, Sharansky “vowed that his first act in freedom would be to read [from the Psalms]:

‘I extol you, O Lord,
for you have lifted me up,
and not let my enemies rejoice over me.’”²

Can I put like this?

Sharansky discovered or rediscovered where he came from,
where some of his roots were...
in the ancient words of the Psalms—poetry that had grounded his ancestors for thousands of years before him. So that even in a prison cell in Russia, he could be planted and holding firm.

According to Psalm 1, the wise life, the righteous life, the faithful life—it is NOT dependent on having unlimited choices.

It IS dependent on being ROOTED...being grounded in something that is much greater than ourselves.

² As told by Bernhard Anderson in *Out of the Depths*. See also Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil: The Classic Memoir of One Man’s Triumph Over a Police State*, New York: PublicAffairs, 1988.

Now, I said at the beginning that Psalm 1 is about the choices we make in life, and that's true. But before we get to those choices, let's look at the second part of this marvelous image that Psalm 1 paints for us.

The righteous...

“...are like trees planted by streams of water...”

By streams of water.

Think about that description for a moment.

A tree cannot survive without water.

And it cannot give itself water.

It must be given water.

It must receive water in order to live.

The water that a tree needs in order to survive and thrive is not earned by the tree, it's not somehow achieved by the tree. Nor is it chosen by the tree.

It is pure gift for the tree.

It is pure grace.

Put another way, there's something about the **RIGHTEOUS** way of living described in this Psalm that is deeply connected to grace.

Being fed by something else, someone else, because we cannot always feed ourselves—that's grace.

This might just be a harder pill for us to swallow.

You and I don't always like to be receivers of grace.

Oh, we talk about grace a lot in church, and sometimes—perhaps many times—we don't mind giving grace to others.

But admitting our need for grace?
That's a harder bargain.

How many of you have ever been in position where you knew you needed some help, and someone says to you, "Here, let me help you,"—and you reply, "Oh no, no—I've got this!"

Even though you know you don't have it?

In the popular Netflix series *The Queen's Gambit*, the central character, Beth Harmon, is an orphan who learns chess from the janitor, Mr. Shaibel, in the basement her orphanage.

She quickly demonstrates not just that she understands the game. But that she can dominate the game.

When Beth reaches her teenage years, she's a prodige. She's adopted by a couple. And she keeps playing chess.

She enters tournaments—tournaments against college students, and Beth is years younger, and all of her opponents are young men...and she wins, and she wins, and she wins.

Now Beth also has her own struggles, her own personal sources of pain. Problems with addiction start wrecking havoc with everything he's gained.

But one day, when her life is turning into a mess, a friend from long ago, from the orphanage finds her. Jolene has come by to see her,

because Mr. Shaibel—the janitor who taught Beth chess all those years earlier—Mr. Shaibel has died.

Jolene wants to know if perhaps Beth would like to go to the funeral with her. They do, and then later, Beth asks Jolene to take her back to the orphanage.

It's the first time she's been there since she was adopted.

She goes in.

She goes down to Mr. Shaibel's old office, down in the basement, where she first learned to play chess.

But she doesn't look at a chess board.

She sees a bulletin board.

On the bulletin board are all sorts of newspaper clippings, magazine articles, stories about her success as a chess champion.

She pulls a picture from that bulletin board, one that was taken when she was just a girl, a picture of her and Mr. Shaibel. He kept it! All these years later, and he kept it.

Beth goes back to the car where Jolene is waiting.

And she breaks down and cries.

Why is she crying?

Not only because Mr. Shaibel remembered her,

Not only because he took pride in her.

She's in tears because of the grace Mr. Shaibel gave her early in her life.

She sees it now, very clearly.

How he helped set her life on a good path...

It's an imaginary story, but a very TRUE scene.

After all, how many times in our own lives do you and I come to realize, after the fact, how much we have been given?

How much of the good paths we have walked—
have depended not so much on OUR wisdom,
but on the grace of God coming to us through someone else?

It's striking that so often throughout Scripture, the ethics of life—the choices of life, the teachings for how to live a good life—those ethics, those choices are so often preceded by an experience of grace.

Consider the 10 commandments.
Who received the 10 commandments?
Moses, yes, good. And he gave them to the Israelites.

But what came before the 10 commandments?

God appeared to Moses in the burning bush.
God rescued the Israelites by parting the Red Sea.
Those were experiences of divine grace.

Or consider the Apostle Paul.
Paul gave us an ethic to live by, a path to walk down:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good...
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer...
extend hospitality to strangers.”

A marvelous ethic for life.

But what happened before Paul came up with that ethic?
Before he described the kind of life we ought to live?

He was on the road to Damascus, persecuting God's church, and he was **BLINDED** by God's grace...

The opening Psalm of the Psalter is right in line with that theology.

We are called, most definitely, to make the most faithful choices we can in this life. But **BEFORE** we can do any of that, we must be planted by water, we must be near a source of grace.

“They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season...”

That's the third image.

A tree that's rooted,
that's nourished by waters of grace...
it will bear its fruit in due season.

Perhaps the public figure who is doing the most to teach those of us in the Church this lesson—the lesson that the only way ANY of us can live ethical lives is by recognizing our common kinship,
our common need for grace and generosity
—is Father Gregory Boyle.

What Boyle has done with his life and ministry is truly remarkable.

Because of Boyle's leadership with Homeboy Industries,
people who used to **KILL** to stay alive,
now work as cooks or mechanics or run a business—
in order to make a living...

The first time I ever heard of Father Boyle was 15 years ago.

I was listening to the radio, and there was a piece on this Catholic priest who had dedicated his life to helping teenagers, young men and women in LA gangs turn their lives around.

But then Father Boyle was diagnosed with leukemia.
And he went to the hospital to get treated.

And one day when he's in the hospital, he received a visit from one of the young men whom he was trying to help. The young man was known as Grumpy.

Sounds like one of the 7 dwarves, but this guy was no cartoon.
He was big and huge, with "no neck and a ton of tattoos".

Grumpy went to Father Boyle's bedside.

And with tears streaming down his face, Grumpy looked into the eyes of the priest who was making such a difference in his life, and he asked Gregory Boyle:

“What do I have that you need?”³

THAT QUESTION was a choice.
A choice about how to view the world.
A choice about how one is going to live in that world.

³ This story appeared on NPR in 2006.

I said at the beginning we'd get to the choices that this Psalm presents to us...and I think we just did.

I wonder what would happen if you and I spent the season of Lent asking that question—

“What do I have that you need?”

of one another,
of our neighbors,
of the world that God's loves so much.

It's the kind of question that could TRANPLANT us—
by streams of living water...
not only during the season of Lent,
but every season of our lives.

Amen.