

Plymouth Presbyterian Church, St. Helens
November 14, 2021
Psalm 16
Life's Orientation

As a guest preacher this morning , this may not be the best way to begin our time together with the scriptures, but I have a question for you.

Have you ever asked yourself what your Psalm IQ might be? That is have you taken an inventory on how much you know about the book of Psalms, or how comfortable and familiar you are with this book of the Bible?

Here are a few questions to help you with this task:

- How many of the 150 Psalms are you familiar with?
- How many have you tried to read or meditate with?
- How does your church use the Book of Psalms?
- How many Psalms are in your mind and soul: your memory?

Enough of the Psalm IQ – most of us come up quite short in addressing such an inventory. Our church as a whole uses the Psalms as partial pieces of liturgy: Call to Worship, Prayer of Confession or its response, Words of Thanksgiving, words of comfort in a Funeral or Memorial service. With the collective, or denominational use of the Psalms in this way, it is not too surprising that most of us have very little familiarity with whole Psalms, or the Book of Psalms as a unit.

So, let us move on to a maybe easier question in this inventory.....

What is your experience with the Book of Psalms, or any particular Psalm? Not what do you know about the Psalms, but what have you experienced surrounding the Psalms. It would be interesting to have the time to share some of these experiences.

My first memory was not in any way related to the church. It was on the school playground as a 1st grader. A friend, or playmate had convinced me it was of ultimate importance that I memorize, as she had done, Psalm 23 or Psalm 100 – I really can't remember which one it was. We worked on it for several days as other kids were running and screaming all around us. I don't know what church she was attached to that made such evangelism part of its core practices. I now wonder how many stars got pasted after her name for such a feat.

But the importance of such a memorization practice came back to me in two scenes fairly early in my ministry. As an Interim Pastor in a church, I was called on to run to the hospital to call on a very elderly member of the congregation who was near death. In such a setting, there is no history of relationship to draw upon, other than years of church membership, and this woman was too near death to enter into a get acquainted conversation. So I introduced myself and asked if I could read some scripture and have prayer with her. In such a situation it is not too unusual to say a few words of peace and comfort and then, I began to recite Psalm 23, which she immediately began to say with me. I tried to reassure her, as weak as she was, that she could just relax and let me say the words for her. It immediately became very clear that if Psalm 23 was going to be said, she would join in, no matter how few breaths she had left in her life yet to breath. What a lesson for me, that once a scriptural text is within us, it is with us to the very end and can offer comfort, strength and hope that none of us can explain or diminish. It is something we cannot give to anyone else – right at that moment of need.

In another pastoral setting, I was calling on a member of the church who had been in a care center for years. This

woman could not move or even lift anything without her bones breaking and causing increased difficulty. I recognized her family name as being part of a well known family of importance in the history of the Germanic stream of the Congregational church in this country, so talked some of her connections and history within this family. She told me of that church's practice of assigning each young person a particular scripture at the time of their confirmation. I knew of this tradition and asked her what her assigned passage had been. She told me quite proudly that since her early teen age years, as a member of the church she had lived with Psalm 90. And every time I visited her, she wanted me to read that Psalm to her – even though she knew it by heart and would be mouthing the words silently as I read aloud. What a witness to me! Someone who had been lying in bed for a long time and had no hope of her physical situation improving – had the gift of scripture within her to feed her soul and when someone like me, came along, she could relate her faith journey and demonstrate to a young, able bodied pastor, how to be sustained by scripture, a Psalm, in a physically, horrible situation. She could not hold a Bible in her hand to read it, but she had a Psalm – in her soul. It gave her comfort over and over again.

Any one of the Psalms is rarely the topic for a sermon. In fact, I was once told, that this book of scripture is not a preaching book. I don't know where that thought came from, and it certainly isn't any rule or dictate. As time goes on, I think it is not a piece of wisdom, nor is it good advice for any of us.

So today, we turn to Psalm 16 – and what a blessing I am discovering it to be!! Psalm 16 places before the hearer, or reader, a choice – it is a choice on a way to shape your life. Much like Psalm 1, Psalm 16 tells us that life is lived either with

God or without God, And which way you respond to that choice will make all the difference in the world – to the person being addressed and to everyone they come into contact with , and have relationship with.

Choose life.

Choose God.

And you will have life, as will those around you.

Psalm 16 is much like our more modern Statements of Faith or Confession of Faith that the larger church writes from time to time. But if you read through several of the Psalms, you will quickly discover that not all Psalms are designed in that same way. Over all, the Book of Psalms covers every emotion known to humans: joy, gratitude, disappointment, fear, transgression, faith, lack of faith, desire for retaliation, hope, and security within the fold of God. The Book of Psalms orients us in the way to live in real life, as God's people.

“What are those ways?” It is fair to ask.

And to address that, we go much further back in the biblical story. Back to Exodus, the second book of the Bible. Exodus begins with the story of Moses and as the story develops, God asks Moses to stand against Pharaoh and his harsh rule of slavery and the use/abuse of people.

The slaves cannot free themselves and God intervenes, causes calamity and the escape of the slaves under Moses' guidance and leadership. God then uses that group of people to set forth what a community will look like, and how it will be governed to live as Gods people, where all are honored and respected. Once again, choose God's ways and know life, or not and know disaster and death like existence..

Centuries later, Jesus was born into the group of people who followed God's ways, but once again, they are an occupied

people and life is very difficult. Jesus showed the way to live as God would want people to live. Even in his arrest and execution, the story of Jesus' teaching was not brought to an end. The Psalmist view of choosing life with or without God, and basing a life's orientation upon that choice continued in Jesus' day and his teaching and has been the road to follow ever since. If we orient our lives with God, as the Psalmist sets out, at every turn of life, as long as we live, is a choice to claim once again. When we choose God's pathway, we can rejoice and be glad in living with God.

To make such choices over and over again as life presents us new chapters to live into and to walk through, let the book of Psalms be as a prayer book to you, setting forth the choices that have always been set before the people of God. When you wring your hands and don't know just what to do. When life is too full, sad, or difficult, rest assured that the people of God have been this way before. It has all been experienced in some surprisingly familiar ways by our ancestors. And miracle upon miracles, they have left us a record – a record of the pathway forward. Read today's Psalm, and then another one and another one. In the process, you will see what it is to “stay with God”, to pour out you soul to God, to renew your pledge to live in God's ways , no matter how bumpy the road may be.

Continue to read the Psalms. Expand the repertoire of familiarity with the Psalms. Let your life show a resolve to live, as the Psalmist encourages: live your life with God and not with the Pharaohs or the Pilates of the world.

Stay steadfast as a disciple of the Psalms and you will develop a life oriented on

the goodness and faithfulness of God,
the giver and preserver of life itself. Amen.

