

SERMON
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 1
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, February 16, 2025
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Psalm 1

1:1 Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers, 1:2 but their delight is in the instruction of the LORD, and on God's instruction they meditate day and night. 1:3 They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. 1:4 The wicked are not so but are like chaff that the wind drives away. 1:5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous, 1:6 for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

(Image of tree by stream up in sanctuary; split screen on live stream with tree and the sanctuary)



Imagine that you are a tree who lives along a stream. You and that stream and all the trees around you are not separate entities, but a symbiotic sisterhood taking care of each other just by being you.

The water and the roots live and move and have beingness in a constant and intimate sharing of nutrients and molecules.

There is an always to this life in common—more than a conversation, more than a partnership. This social arrangement is given, it is proper to the created nature of the roots and the water, the silt and the tiny strands of root hair that soak and sift, absorb and clean.

Imagine yourself in this balanced way of life—not having to strive or reach for what you need, not having to worry about bills or paychecks or driving yourself so hard, but just being where you are and having what you need—and in that being where you are, all that is around you also has what they need.

Breathe gently. Sense into your own rootedness in this moment. In this space, in this place of provision, of resource, of sacred symbiosis. Slowly move your toes, your feet in any way

that feels as close to effortless and natural as you can. Imagine these parts of you simply being tended to, healthy, well.

You are open to what is around you. What is around you is life. What is around you is well. What is around you is this swell, this flow, this deep trustworthiness. See if you can just be here like the tree by the stream. Just for a few more seconds be right here like a tree who lives along the gently flowing stream. You have everything you need.

(pause)

Take tree picture down from live stream, it can stay up in the sanctuary.

This state of being resourced is what the Psalmist calls “happy.”

Happy is right relationship.

Happy is open to what God provides around you for nourishment, instruction, clarity of purpose.

Happy is delighting in stable rootedness in supportive conditions.

No matter the stress, the mess, the duress—imagine this stable rootedness is your reality all the time. You always have access to this stream, to this deep aquifer of what you need.

This is the way of life the psalmist calls righteousness.

That word can sound so heavy, so judgy, so arrogant. But really righteousness is the opposite of arrogant and judgy for the psalmist. Righteousness embodies this osmosis, this being in the way things are made, this openness to resource, to source, to the learning and growing we are made to do when we know we have support. Righteousness is the way of life that grows out of right relationship.

(play video about osmosis)

Psalm 1 says your relationship to God’s steadfast love is like that—osmosis—like a tree planted by the flowing stream.

Psalm 1 introduces us to this Book of the People, we call the Book of Psalms—this collection of songs, poetry, lament, prayer, diatribe, truth telling, instruction, description. Psalm 1

frames this important distinction that we need in order to understand the whole story told in the Psalter of God's connection to the created world.

The Psalms are like a Bible within the Bible—they have it all—stories of sorrow, joy, jubilation, despair—the contours of faith, descriptions of our best possibilities and our worst fears, and harshest experiences.

Psalms 1 gives us the framework of happiness being the way of life that grows out of faith, out of openness to God's instruction, God's invitation to trusting the resource of love no matter our circumstances. This capacity we all possess to stand in the midst of turmoil and tumult and stay rooted and grounded in God's resource, God's steady love.

And Psalm 1 brings precision to this framing of happiness, of righteousness also through contrast with another way of life called wickedness.

Now if there's ever been a historic moment that cried out for a refresher course on how to recognize wickedness, I would say we are in it.

We are in a blitzkrieg of cruelty and greed and destabilization right now. Every day we are inundated with new reasons to feel insecure, helpless, under threat, afraid. There is a foreboding to these days we are living. What's next, what is happening, what can we do, what do we do?

The way of the wicked is on full display.

These words in Psalm 1 can feel complicated: wicked, sinner, scoffer

They come to us loaded with the ways they've been misused, misdirected—so you may feel like shutting down to what they have to offer us right now. Many of us have been lumped with the wicked, the sinners. And so it can feel like the best thing to do is to reject those terms outright. They are too dangerous.

We can lose sight of their purpose, their importance because of the way they have been weaponized and used to distract from the true wickedness that humans can choose.

So just like we imagined ourselves as the tree planted along the stream, we need to be able to see the way of life that is wickedness so that we can use our energy to resist, to persist in our practice of nourishing the way of life that will lead to our thriving. And so we won't be unwittingly taken in by the wickedness that we have forgotten how to see.

Wickedness for the psalmist is not about identity, it's not about our created nature, it's not about sexuality, it's not about social location.

Wickedness is about arrogance, it is about seeing yourself as a free agent, it is about thinking you are entitled to live as a law unto yourself, it is about individualism—the rugged kind that does not see harm as a problem, but as a necessary evil of getting ahead in life.

Wickedness is staking your life on the calculus of consumption and hoarding and climbing the ladder no matter how many people get hurt in the process. Wickedness is believing that you know better than everyone else, that you are your own god, that you don't need anybody and you especially don't need God.

Wickedness stakes its claim on American ideals like self-sufficiency, like autonomy, like seeing the need for help and support as a sign of weakness or deficiency.

Now before we go too far on the wickedness diatribe, let's acknowledge how much we've been can succumb to these false narratives. We've been told in American culture that these things that the psalmist calls wicked are actually a sign of success, prosperity, wealth, winning.

The way of wickedness is, in many ways, the American way. The way the new administration is telling us we need to get back to—when oppression wasn't questioned, when white male landowners were allowed to do as they please and get what they want on the backs of whoever they needed to step on, when systemic gaslighting was socially acceptable and unquestioned. When those with financial and social capital can be a law unto themselves.

The way of the wicked is the way of being openly hostile to instruction, to learning, to truth, to correction, to humility, to how much we need each other to be well to thrive.

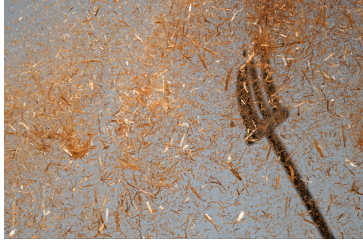
Wickedness is extractive. It is destructive. It is deadly.

As much as the tree by the living stream can stand in the midst of any conditions and be tapped into resource, wickedness is diffuse, chaotic, grasping.

It comes apart as easy as the chaff blows away from the wheat seed. The psalmist brings to mind the ease of the winnowing process. That's how easy the way of wickedness separates and dysregulates—like the chaff blowing in the wind.

(show video of winnowing process)

After video put up winnowing picture in the sanctuary and split screen on live stream.



This “wheat from the chaff” metaphor has also been weaponized—used as a warning, a way to justify separating and dividing the human family. When this language about the chaff is really just a statement of fact, more like cause and effect than a way humans should exclude or sort ourselves.

The chaff flies off in the wind just by its very nature—that’s how easily it separates from the wheat. It’s not hard, it’s not a lot of effort. It’s just a consequence of how it functions.

Wickedness creates those kinds of conditions. It is not rooted, it is diffuse. It is not well resourced, it is basically a byproduct of being cut off from that which is the source of growth.

The way of wickedness is the willful rejection of learning, of knowing oneself to be interdependent, of believing there is a unique power at the heart of the universe that is bigger than each of us. The way of wickedness, the psalmist says, does not stand. It does not have staying power—just like the chaff, it does not have the power and wisdom to stay rooted.

Wickedness is unstable. It does not stand for long. It has no foundation.

The way of wickedness, the psalmist says, is the way of perishing. That is not death as a form of punishment, but simply cause and effect. The chaff blows away in the wind—it perishes because it is not rooted, it does not stay connected. And disconnection, individualism, being a law unto oneself cannot last, it is to rooted in life-giving conditions, it cannot stand.

**Take winnowing picture down in the sanctuary and put back up tree.
Go back to live stream (no split screen)**

The poetry of the Hebrew in Psalm 1 brings a vividness to this invitation to be mindful about the way of life we choose.

Happy comes from a word for “set right,” “on the right track,” moving forward toward understanding. This way of life that is always open to God’s teaching, to God’s instruction

leads to prospering–this word “prosper” is not about financial prosperity, but about always having access to that which sustains life. So the ways we have been taught to understand “happy” as “getting and having what you want” is a distortion. Happy at its root in our faith tradition is really about right relationship and being aware of the truth of how we are made to be rooted in life source.

Capitalism has taught us that this life source is money. The Psalmist calls us back to the most elemental truth about how we are made. Our thriving is not based on money, but on love–the ways we are rooted and grounded in a love that abides no matter our circumstances–this is true whether we believe it or not.

Like the tree beside a stream–it is already who we are and where we are. Happy are those who see that truth about ourselves and do not follow the advice of the wicked. Happy are those, blessed are those, maybe even joyful are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked.

Wicked comes from a word meaning “disjointed” or “loose of limbs”, something that doesn’t hold together. Something that cannot stand, that cannot stay connected. And the psalmist connects this diffuseness to hostility toward God and toward God’s teaching.

The way of the wicked is the path that turns away from God’s teaching (turning away from God is the definition of sin).

The scoffers are those who are arrogant and unwilling to accept instruction. The scoffers are the one who count themselves superior, above the law, beyond reproach, in no need of correction or instruction.

Some translations use the word “law” for the word torah. But that translation can too quickly take us to a place of legalism being the same as God’s instruction. There is Torah with a capital “T” which is Hebrew scripture that contains the law. But this word in Psalm 1 is torah with a lowercase “t” which is really instruction/teaching. That can include the law, but it is more than law, it is story, it is formation, it is the way we find ourselves in the stories of faith, in the stories of how life unfolds. Needing this instruction is not a burden, but a blessing, a connection to resource that sustains us.

Being open to this journey of learning and growing is the way of righteousness. Being set on a course that is not about learning, but about getting your way at the expense of others, that is the way of wickedness.

And the wicked do prosper—but when they do, it is not because they are rooted in supportive conditions. They are finding temporary traction in unstable conditions. So it does not last, it does not stand.

Psalm 1 does not neutralize the harm that is happening every day in America. But it does call us back to the truth that is going to sustain us through this brutal time. The wicked do prosper sometimes, but wickedness cannot truly prosper for the long haul. It is built on nothing, it has no foundation.

We need to remember that we are the trees along the streams of living water. We take good care of each other. We have what we need when we live in balance with one another.

The way of wickedness is having its day—but it does not have what it takes for the long haul, for the sustenance of true life. It will perish because it does not have connection to source. Wickedness is a waste product of sin—of a turning away from love, from God's intentions for right relationship.

This is not a time to abandon the teachings of our faith, but to lean into their elemental truth. Part of decolonizing our faith is being open to the truth we find when the chaff blows away in the wind. Then we can realize anew how deeply we have been connected to source all along, how much our best possibilities have been obscured by white supremacy and patriarchy and heteronormativity and individualism and the lies capitalism teaches us about our most basic impulses.

The path of righteousness is not arrogant, it is wise to the truth of how we are made for life together. Right relationship is our birthright and our best hope for surviving this current assault on our shared humanity. How can we embody the truth that can and will set us free from lies that are on the march in America?

It starts with knowing ourselves to be the trees built for staying tapped into life source—letting our rootedness feed us and form us as a drought resistant people when the desert time sets in.

Thanks be to God.