

SERMON TITLE: “The Lord Watches Over the Way of the Righteous”

TEXT: Psalm 1

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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There is a theory in psychology called the “left-brain, right-brain dominance theory” which says that each person’s thoughts and dispositions are dominated or controlled by one side of their brain.

Like many theories of this nature, there is a healthy mixture of truth and illusion here, but the theory goes something like this:

The left side of the brain is considered to be well suited for tasks that involve logic, language and analytical thinking, and reasoning and numbers.

The right side of the brain, on the other hand, is best at expressive and creative tasks. Some of the abilities that are popularly associated with the right side of the brain include:

- Expressing and reading emotions
- Music
- Color
- Images
- Creativity

I don’t know which side you would put yourself on, but I would fall squarely on the “left brain” side of the theory.

I was reminded of this last week as I attended a Mennonite Church Alberta theological studies conference at Foothills Mennonite Church in Calgary.

Our topic was how we read and interpret the Bible, and AMBS professor emeritus of Old Testament, Perry Yoder, led our sessions.

The first morning, we were given a passage of Scripture, several pieces of paper, a box of crayons and felt markers, and told that we had an hour to spend “creatively” re-presenting the text. We were told to think in terms of “colours” and “spaces.” We were told to write the text “as it came to us.” And we were told that after the hour was done, we would be showing and explaining our work to our fellow participants.

For a left-brained person, this all sounded about as pleasant as a trip to the dentist ☺.

So, armed with my crayons and paper, I went off to “creatively” depict my text—which just happened to be the same one that showed up in our lectionary readings this week, and which we have already heard read this morning: Psalm 1.

I will spare you the misfortune of the drawing I came up with but as the hour went by I was surprised to find myself *enjoying* it a little bit. It was good to be forced to engage with Scripture in a way that I was not accustomed to and that I would not have chosen myself.

Certain themes jumped out at me in new ways. Certain words stood out and seemed to be more central to the passage than they may look when they are all the same size in a steady stream of black and white text.

One of these words was “happy.”

Psalm 1 begins like this: “**happy** are those who do not

- Follow the advice of the wicked
- Take the path that sinners tread
- Or sit in the seat of scoffers (the Hebrew word for scoffers refers to arrogant people who love conflict, who mock those who trust in God and who refuse to accept correction)

Happy are those who delight in the law of the Lord.

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.

In *all* that they do they prosper.

They are happy—fulfilled, joyful, content, blessed.

It’s pretty straightforward—the psalmist contrasts the destiny of the wicked with that of the righteous, emphasizing that the wicked are eventually destroyed while the godly prosper under the Lord’s protective care.

It sounds like a pretty simple formula. But is it *true*?

Does avoiding the ways of the wicked *really* lead to happiness? Does delighting in the law of the Lord *really* lead to a fruitful life of prosperity, and blessing?

Is life really like this?

There was a time when every Mennonite household could be guaranteed to have at least two books in it: a Bible and a copy of *The Martyrs Mirror*.

The Martyrs Mirror was first published in 1660 by Thieleman J. van Braght, and told the stories of early Christian martyrs, as well as the many Anabaptist Christians in the 1600’s who were persecuted and killed for their convictions about believers baptism and nonviolence.

Over time, these stories grew to become an ever-larger part of Mennonite self-identity.

Like the early Christians, we were a people who suffered for our beliefs. This was the price of obedience. Jesus suffered for us so we ought to be willing to suffer for Jesus. Part of following Jesus was counting the cost, taking up our cross and following him.

These people whose stories filled the pages of *The Martyrs Mirror* who lost their lives certainly *seemed* to “delight in the law of the Lord.” They certainly *seemed* to avoid paths of wickedness. Did they “prosper in all they did?” Were they “happy” or “blessed” as a result of their obedience?

And it’s not just people from ancient history whose faithful living has led to negative outcomes. There continue to be martyrs around the world.

One of the places we visited on our MCC tour to Colombia was called “JustaPaz” (“A Just Peace”)¹ which

is a ministry of the Colombian Mennonite Church, built on the example and calling of Jesus Christ, that constructs processes together with churches and other civil society organizations that contribute to non-violent living, human dignity, justice and sustainable peace in Colombia.

One of the main projects of JustaPaz is a publication called *A Prophetic Call*, which analyzes and documents the armed conflict in Colombia’s impact on Protestant and evangelical churches (69 cases in the year of the most recent publication).

There are many stories in the book, but I will share one example:

Description of the events: Aurelio Contreras, 50 years old, pastor, was married... and had three children.... The family had returned home after a church service. Evangelical Pastor Daniel Benavides*, 39 years old...was visiting Pastor Aurelio Contreras at his house at the time of the crime.

At approximately 9:30 p.m., some ten minutes after the church service had ended, three armed men, one of whom was masked, arrived at Pastor Aurelio Contreras’ house, asking for him. Pastor Daniel Benavides*, who opened the door, said that he wasn’t there, but when Pastor Aurelio Contreras* showed himself, the armed men tied them up and took them to another room, mistreating them verbally and physically hitting them. The men stabbed Pastor Aurelio Contreras* in the face and neck. They then robbed some cell phones and some 300,000 pesos (approximately US \$150), and then proceeded to murder Pastor Aurelio Contreras* by firing three gunshots into his back...

¹ For more information, visit

http://www.justapaz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=137:welcome-to-justapaz

The day after the murder, a flyer appeared in the church saying that the pastor had been killed “for being a rat” (an informant). Both Pastor Aurelio* and Pastor Daniel’s* families left, being displaced.

Local witnesses believe that the pastor was killed because a month prior to his murder, on the evening of September 15, a group of Black Eagles re-armed paramilitaries came to Villa del Socorro and committed a massacre. Many members of the community sought refuge in the church, which was in the middle of a service. Several injured people, including youth, were assisted by the pastor and members of the church. The pastor also called the police, who arrived hours later to help the injured and remove the bodies of those killed. It is believed that this angered the Black Eagles, resulting in the murder of the pastor.

This book is filled with similar stories of murder, kidnapping, harassment, forced displacement, threats, “disappearances,” and torture.

The Lord watches over the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish (v. 6).

Really?

Whenever we read Scripture, we read through the lens of our own experience.

Sometimes our experience and interpretation will confirm the words of the text; sometimes the text will force us to reexamine how we are seeing our experience.

And sometimes, it just isn’t that clear.

In the case of today’s Psalm, perhaps we are wondering, “does this text fit my experience? Does it make sense of what I see and hear in the world?”

I think the answer has to be yes... and no.

Yes, *as a general rule*, living according to God’s plans, delighting in his law, and pursuing righteousness is a path to blessing.

Except when it isn’t.

Yes, *as a general rule*, the way of wickedness leads to misery and destruction.

Except when it doesn’t.

Life just isn’t that simple, as we all know. If there were a straightforward line between righteousness and material prosperity and blessing— If righteousness was *always* rewarded and wickedness *always* punished—then no one would choose wickedness, would they?

More importantly, perhaps, who would choose to love and serve God for *God's* sake?

Who would choose the path of righteousness for the right reasons—because it aligns with our deepest and most cherished intuitions about who God is and who we are and how the world was created to be?

We would come to view God as a giant vending machine where pushing the right buttons would lead to the right products coming out the bottom. We would love God for the rewards we could get out of him.

Perhaps it is *good* that life doesn't always work like this!

So do we just “know better” than the psalmist? Is the psalmist naïve?

I don't think so. First, we need to remember that Psalm 1 is a “wisdom psalm,” and wisdom psalms are not meant to be comprehensive explanations of reality; rather, they are meant to advocate *the best way to live*.

I think the ancient Israelites were just as aware that life is complicated as we are. We see this throughout Scripture.

Even if we stay within the book of Psalms, we see an awareness that things don't always work in the way Psalm 1 describes.

The cry resounds through the Psalter: “Why do the wicked prosper?” “Why do the righteous suffer?” (e.g., Psalm 10, 73).

The tension between the claim that the righteous prospers and the observable reality that the wicked prosper (!) is built right into Israel's songbook!

We also need to remember to take a long enough view of the story—whether in our own individual lives or in terms of the big story God is telling.

Ultimately, of course, the message of Psalm 1 is true.

Ultimately, the righteous *will* prosper. Ultimately what is wicked and false and untrue, whatever damages and defaces God's creation, whatever terrorizes and terrifies and mistreats God's image bearers, whatever is ugly and false and harmful will blow away like chaff in the wind.

It will vanish and be remembered no more; it will no longer be able to thwart God's intentions for his world or his people. It will perish.

So, even if it doesn't offer a comprehensive, airtight explanation for how the world always works in our mixed up world, Psalm 1 remains true because it tells us how we are to live in this same world.

Those who delight in the Lord may prosper *here and now*... or they may not—at least not in the ways we tend to think of “prosperity.”

Those who pursue paths of righteousness may be “happy” *here and now*... or they may not—at least not in the ways we tend to think of “happiness.”

Choosing the right path is no guarantee of a trouble-free life of uninterrupted bliss. The early church knew this well, as did the first Anabaptists, and countless other followers of Jesus throughout history.

Including us. I think that each person in this room knows that sometimes choosing the right path leads to blessing, but sometimes it is a one-way ticket to heartache and suffering.

But ultimately, these are still the right paths to take—for ancient Israel, for war-torn Colombia, or for us here in Canada.

This is so not only because of the prospect of ultimate rewards and vindication, but because choosing the right path forms us into *the right kind of people*.

When we choose paths of righteousness—when we delight in God's law and meditate *on* and participate *in* his purposes for us and for the world—we become the kind of people who will *fit* and *flourish* in the world as it will one day be when it is redeemed and renewed by God, even if this is not always the case in our present experience.

We become, to return to the images of the Psalm, like a well-watered fruitful tree by a river.

These are images of beauty and solidity and strength and productivity—images of creation that remind us of the opening pages of Genesis and bring us back to God's original intentions in creating the world.

May God help us to delight in him, to pursue right paths.

For God's sake. For our sake. For the sake of a mixed up world.

Amen.

