

September 23, 2018
Mark 9:30-37
Psalm 1
Be Like a Word Tree and...
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Today's sermon text from Psalms is about the beauty, wonder and power of the scriptures – the word, also often referred to in the Old Testament as it is here today as: “the Law”. Listen, as I read Psalm 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; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. 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.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. *Words from God for the people of God. Let us pray. Gracious God make these ancient words avenue to your living word that we may be live more faithfully out of your living presence. We pray this in the name of Christ, Amen.*

I could not have been more than three or four when my mother began reading me bible stories at night before going to bed. Some of my earliest and fondest memories are related to the scriptures. I also grew up in the church – attending Sunday school, worship, Vacation Bible School and then when I was older, Youth Group, regularly. I heard those same bible texts preached, told, sung, taught, acted out, and even mimed. By the time I was eighteen, those stories were just a part of me. I took this for granted. In the towns in North Carolina and Virginia where I grew up, everybody went Church. And everybody knew the bible.

When I went to college I decided to take an Old and then a New Testament Bible course. The college I attended was the University of Virginia. Now, it bears recalling that this was THE University of Thomas Jefferson – one he had designed after his own heart – a University he had built to counter the religious violence of which Jefferson was not only historically aware but had witnessed firsthand. It was to be a school, therefore that eschewed traditional Judeo Christian assumptions. Indeed Jefferson's original campus did not even include a chapel – an absolute anomaly in the early nineteen century.

By the nineteen eighties, when I attended, that University had become a bit of a Progressive Yuppie school. It attracted a large number of folks from liberal, agnostic if not outright atheistic, New England. I was therefore shocked upon entering my bible classes there, to find people who had never in their entire lives been directly exposed to any of the scriptures and who, though were among the brightest on the East Coast were yet biblically illiterate.

In these Bible courses I discovered that most of my classmates were American Literature majors who all had this one southern born professor who insisted that they take these bible courses as a

foundation for understanding what then, was a majority of many great American writers. So, what for me was a course for which I had to barely study – for many of my classmates was a slog through completely unfamiliar territory.

But their Literature professor had told them that if they expected to understand Southern writers, they needed to know the Bible. And of course that is true. It would be practically impossible to understand the depth of southern writing if one were biblically illiterate, because it is absolutely littered with scriptural metaphors and references.

And so, in college I discovered my appreciation for and love of scripture. Before then, I had simply taken it for granted. Now I began to understand my knowledge of it as a gift – a knowledge that by my third year of College had issued in a full blown call to ministry. (pause)

But then I received a second shock upon attending Union Presbyterian Seminary. Now, in the religion department of a State Supported University, you expect the approach to scripture to be purely academic. I don't know exactly what I did expect in seminary but it was certainly not that same approach. Yet to my disappointment, in seminary, scripture was not treated as the living, and organic word that it had always been for me, so much as this almost static object to be penetrated only by the brightest, most academically oriented and disciplined.

So, whereas before entering seminary, I had felt confident about my relationship with God and scripture, in seminary, I felt anything but intelligent and knowledgeable; I felt stupid, foolish, dull. I also felt rather alone as one who had experienced the Word as alive in me. In fact, my Mother and my Methodist pastors and teachers had placed an emphasis on me not just knowing the scriptures but experiencing the scriptures.

Yet I was among professors and students for whom individual experience, no matter how powerful, was dismissed as naïve and unreliable at best. They were all erudite in their expression of such biblical concepts as the Grace of God, but I got the distinct impression that few of them had actually really experienced it. Grace, Faith, the Scriptures – they were all objectified as things that had occurred and were written on my behalf regardless of my experience of it. That was all fine and good. But this singular, rather exclusive attitude resulted in a kind of cold, objective faith in Christ using scriptures as a sort of operating manual. My impression of the Methodists had been that they were not all that great at using their heads. Here, among the Presbyterians, they used their heads all right, but experience appeared to count for nothing.

And so, I was taught the Brainiac way of interpreting scripture and it was that whether you are devoting or preaching, you always begin with the objective text of scripture. You let the scripture speak first; but the way you do that is very specific and of course, very academic. Imagination and creativity and real dialogue with something you take to be alive is not really a part of this.

No, the way I was taught was that you begin by studying it in its original language – studying its historical context, its literary context, its literary structure, its true authorship, and its true original intention. In other words, before you even get to think about preaching, you basically write a dissertation on the text. Then and only then are you allowed to make a move from the

“real” interpretation that is now yours, based on all that work, to begin thinking about how you might preach it.

The assumption behind this was that if you followed this process, and really *only* if you followed this process could you ever genuinely let the scriptures speak for themselves and therefore allow God to speak; whereas if you began with an idea that was related to a scripture and then used that scripture to further elaborate the idea, it was not the scripture speaking – not God talking – but you and your sinful agenda.

While today I value this approach – especially for those first starting out in ministry or those who are new to the liturgical life of worship in a congregation – I believe that it is found wanting when it comes to being a real human pastor dealing with real human disciples. Because if one is too strict with this approach one ends up denying something very basic to living as children of the Word within the body of Christ – and that is – in places where the scriptures *are really* taken seriously and *are* viewed as central and essential to life together – I have found the Word to be *as* alive *in* the people – as it is *on* the pages of the Bible in the pulpit where the people worship. While we need standards for study, at the same time, we worship the Living Word – a Word that is not contained by bible but to which the bible only gives testimony – beautiful testimony, I’ll grant you, but testimony to –not sole container of.

It is the preacher’s task to *discern* God’s Living Word. And this is not done just by remotely studying a text with as much objectivity as possible, but by using my own living relationship with it over a lifetime as a reliable and authentic resource. AND... that includes spending quality time with the people in my congregation and broader community of the world so hopefully the Word that comes through me is as prescient and tailor-made to my own context as it possibly could be.

I have been consciously exposed to the scriptures now for about fifty-four years. I have also been a preacher now for thirty-one years. So, I see something happen that is odd and unusual and the way I make sense out of it is with a story or a metaphor, or a precept that most often comes from the Bible. And it’s usually instantaneous. Most of the time, it happens without me even thinking about it. So to say that backing into a scripture passage by starting with my experience (rather than a specific text) denies the ability of God to speak or is somehow not centered in the Living Word just does not ring true.

That being said, it has only been in the last ten years, that I quit thinking of the seminary way of preparing sermons as the gold standard. And that has been a breath of fresh air for me.

Each week, I have a conversation – a dialogue with scripture – with The Word that I experience as absolutely alive and as such, mysterious, sometimes cagy, and always surprising. And then, on Sunday I get to share with you the fruits of that dialogue.

It’s like – well, like the Psalmist says this morning: “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season; their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.”

Comparing one who has the living Word of God in them to a tree – now as a lover of the scripture and a preacher, I can work with that. We all love trees. They do so much.

They provide shade. They often bear fruits or nuts. They add oxygen to the air. Their wood is fuel for fires or lumber for shelter. They give protection from wind. Their foliage and roots prevent erosion. They are beautiful in shape, and virtually infinite in variety.

According to the Botanical Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) as reported in the *Journal of Sustainable Forestry*, the planet Earth is home to more than 60,000 species of trees, some 8,000 of which are found in Brazil.

So when the psalmist speaks of a tree in verse 3 of Psalm 1, to what species is he referring?

Fir? Poplar? Elm? Cedar? Maple? Oak? Palm? Apple? Fig?

What are these beautiful, fruitful trees with leaves that don't wither?

The name, to me, that best describes this tree is, in fact, the "Word Tree." These days, as I discovered in college the Word Tree is somewhat rare, but beautiful when you run across it. A Word Tree is one who is "rooted" in the Word.

And according to the Psalmist, there are certain characteristics of a Word Tree:

When one is a Word Tree, one is happy — tickled pink to be perched on a river bank being exactly what he or she is supposed to be. "Happy are those ..." says the psalmist. Now, it is well understood that God didn't put us on this earth — and Jesus didn't die on the cross — just so we could be happy. Our purpose and goals for a meaningful life go well beyond the desire to be happy.

On the other hand, we can also say with certainty that a Word Tree who is always *unhappy* just doesn't make sense. The psalmist's point is that this healthy tree planted by "streams of water," God's source of life, is ultimately happy since that happiness is connected to something beyond current circumstances.

Another characteristic of the Word Tree is that he or she is inoculated against listening to or taking bad advice. Being grounded in the living waters, the living Word, one is more careful about whose opinions out there he or she values or respects. No wonder one who is a word tree is happy. The ability to listen and respond to love, the truth and what is helpful over statements that are intended to mislead or bait us, will tend to do that. This is particularly timely these days where false reports of events if not outright lies by those in power, thrive. It is *really* easy these days to listen to fools.

The apostle Paul was even surprised by the tendency of followers to believe just about anything. In Galatians (1:6-7), he says, "I am *astonished* that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another

gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.” There is certainly a lot of that going on these days.

What else? *The Word Tree* according to the psalmist is also one who doesn’t walk down the same sullied path as everybody else. One does not “take the path that the unrighteous tread” (v. 1). These people are strong enough to stand against the current, go against the crowd and clear their own trail.

The Word Tree is that person who delights in the Word of God. It is a key to our moral and spiritual formation. Yes, *The Word Tree*, says the psalmist, is that person who not only delights in the word of God, but digs into the Word continually. “And on his law they meditate day and night,” says the Psalmist. A real Word Tree is one who gets into it seriously. It is a conscious aspect of his or her life.

Anything Else? Oh yes! *The Word Tree* is that person who is fruitful. These people “yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.” *The Word Tree* is a fruitful, leafy tree! A tree as a metaphor for faithfulness is not confined to Psalm 1. Psalm 92:14 tells us that “they are always green.” Jeremiah 17:8 says “And its leaves shall stay green.” The person grounded in the living word – not just the static words on this page but the Word *in* the words that is alive – *lives* out of that.

This is a person you want to hire. This is a person you can trust with your children. This is a person you can trust to manage the office. This is a person who you trust implicitly.

So, you could say the Word Tree *looks good*. But it also *makes others look good*. Trees with lots of foliage help keep our atmosphere rich with oxygen, benefiting everyone. The word tree is like that, too. He or she wants to help others breathe better, live better. People are better because they hang out under the shade that this believer offers.

Becoming a Word Tree is the very best thing you can do for yourself. Unlike the way it has so often been portrayed by our more fundamentalist brothers and sisters as life strangling and libido curbing, living out of the Word is the most life-enhancing thing one can do. Take it from me it is a wonderful, beautiful adventure.

So, would you consider yourself a Word Tree? If so, awesome. If not, why not?

Let us pray. Gracious God, thank-you for your Word – not just your words on the page but the living word that those words of scripture point to. Make us Word Trees, depositories of that living Word that is ultimately the Christ.

And now bless these gifts that they may help spread that living word planting Word Trees everywhere. In the name of Christ, Amen.

Note portions of this sermon were taken from July-August 2018 Issue of Homiletics Magazine.