

Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Elizabeth Blunt Transcript

"A Joyful Traveler Pursuing God"

Three of our four scriptures today describe two paths, preaches Mother Beth, bringing to mind Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken". But unlike in Frost, the paths in our readings are not equally fair; "one is a way of blessing and one is a way of woe."

When we choose the blessed path and pursue God, she preaches, we embrace the belovedness in those around us, we "become like trees planted by water: deeply rooted, secure, fruitful," and we orient our hearts "to see like Jesus."

Watch her sermon from Sunday, February 13. The readings are Jeremiah 17:5–10, Psalm 1, 1 Corinthians 15:12–20, and Luke 6:17–26.

Sermon Transcript:

May I speak to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Please be seated.

Good morning everybody. On the occasion, when I get to teach Psalm 1, some of you know this firsthand because you've had to listen to it, I often like to pair it with Robert Frost's, The Road Not Taken. You know this one, I think. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry, I could not travel both and be one traveler, I looked down one as far as I could and then took the other as just as fair." The whole poem is really a reflection on how seemingly small, almost arbitrary, choices can make all the difference in our lives when all said and done. Well, three out of four of our scriptures this morning, and you could almost make an argument for a clean sweep including someone, are also describing two paths. But there's no neutrality here. The choices are not equally fair. In each case, one is a way of blessing, and the other is a way of woe. All the voices speaking to us this morning are exhorting us to choose the right road, the good way. Jeremiah 17 and Psalm 1 have so much in common that we really have to wonder if the prophet had the poem in hand way back in the 6th century BCE, which is more than possible, maybe even likely. There are differences too. Jeremiah is thinking about where we humans choose to put our trust. By that, I think he means where we choose to focus, where we find meaning and hope, where we orient our hearts. "We can put our trust," he says, "in mortal things, things perishable and corrupt, or in heavenly things, the better choice because God's steadfastness and trustworthiness are out of question and universally sustaining." Someone is more interested in sustained action in the best way to move through life in harmony with our creator. And when all those beautiful old Latin manuscripts, the first filigreed letter of this Psalm is b for biotas or blessed. Blessed are they. You'll notice though, if you look at your bulletin, that we translate the first word these days not as blessed, but as happy.

And that's because the Hebrew word here isn't Baruch, which is what Jeremiah used, it's Ashrei, which doesn't really mean happiness either, or at least not happiness as we think of it. It's more like profound joy or satisfaction, and Ashrei carries a fun little Hebrew pun. It sounds almost exactly like the word four steps. So "Joyful, the traveler who has not walked, or stood, or sat." Notice how those words gradually slow to a full stop. "Who has not acclimated herself to selfishness, and corruption, and cruelty." These are the ways of the world. The Psalm says that walking that path can alter our hearts over time, can make us feel detached from truth and purpose, and community, like chaff in the wind. The way of satisfaction or joy, by contrast, is a life spent pursuing the law of the Lord, the Torah. And you might rightly think of the Torah as the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, but Torah can also refer to one particular teaching or to all of scripture spoken and recorded to the wisdom of the elders, passed down through the generations, or to just the general munificent guidance and instruction of God. It's not surprising that this was the Psalm chosen to be the introduction to the psalter at least 2,500 years ago. This is a Psalm that encourages us to learn, to fill our hearts and minds with good things, the things of God, so that those things are bubbling up within us day and night. It encourages us to adopt a posture of sustained alertness to whatever God might have to teach us, whether we're at home with our Bibles or out in the world amongst our neighbors. When we live in constant pursuit of God, according to the Psalm, according to Jeremiah, we become like trees planted by water, deeply rooted, secure in times of drought, fruitful, and blessed.

Now, after living some life and learning some lessons, you might well feel that someone's math does not add up. That the righteous path does not always lead to flourishing, and that the good don't always prosper. The whole book of Job, which we're going to study in the season of Lent, is basically an objection along those lines. We might also say that the life of a rooted tree, a life of study and internal development and growth, strikes us as a little static, maybe a little self-serving. From the time of his baptism, Jesus' presence in the world was dynamic and altruistic. So far in Luke, we've witnessed him giving up himself to all those who ask, getting up every morning in fact, to seek out need. Just before today's lesson, Jesus took His disciples up the mountain to pray. He selected 12 apostles from among them, and then He descended into the great crowd waiting on the plane below, much like Moses bringing the law down from Mount Sinai. This is the first speech of any length that Jesus has made in Luke. And in it, He chooses to riff on this classic motif of blessings and woes. But we see immediately that He's up to something different. Is this an objection to the morality of the scriptures that He's grown up studying, is it a refutation? Blessed He says, are not the moral, or the pious, or the diligent, blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who mourn, the marginalized and the persecuted. Woe to those who are rich, and full, and laughing, to those who are respected and comfortable. Now, for many of us, these beatitudes are familiar. We know the sound of them. So we don't hear them in quite the same way that the people gathered that day would have. But listen again to how fiercely and how radically this teaching still opposes the values of our world. And I think most of us know Matthew's version a bit better.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. But Luke probably gets closer to Jesus' actual words here. These blessings aren't metaphorical, they are literal. And that should in no way surprise us if we were listening to the Magnificat back at Christmas time. The mighty one has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things. The rich He has sent empty away. If we were listening to Jesus teach in the synagogue in Nazareth, we should already know that He was sent to proclaim by word and deed, good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, release to the captives, to usher in the day of God's Kingdom and affirm God's solidarity with those in need and trouble.

Two ways. But Jesus isn't necessarily describing the same fork in the road. Because you and I, and I suspect our ancient predecessors, recognize bits of ourselves on either side of this great juxtaposition. It's not an either or. We may be poor in belongings, but rich in love and respect of our community. We may have more than we need materially, but suffer in body, or mind, or spirit. Jesus' blessings and woes are literal, but they aren't only literal. They also describe a spiritual landscape that He wants us to learn. The landscape that's at the heart of God. These pairs are questions with answers. For every lack, there is a resource. For every instance of poverty, another of riches. For everyone who hunger is a person with food. For all those who weep, someone with unencumbered shoulders who can help carry the burden. Through interdependence and reciprocity, through relationship with one another, woes can be eased and blessings can be shared. For those with ears to hear. This sermon of Jesus provides a map of what the church, what all of us together are supposed to be. Now to do that or to be that, we have to learn to see like Jesus. To look upon all the needy we encounter, even ourselves, and recognize them as beloved of God. To perceive the blessing of God upon them. We also need to take inventory of our own surplus. We need to be aware of what we might share in this life to make it look a little bit more like the life to come. In the Gospel of Mark, there's this moment where Jesus restores sight to a man born blind. It's memorable to me because it takes two tries. Jesus has to lay hands on this guy twice. After the first go, He asked the man, "Can you see anything?" And he says, "I see people, but they look like trees walking." It's such a strange little note. It always sticks with me. And part of me wonders if in that space between the man is seeing things more like Jesus does, more like somebody who's both divine and mortal. Jesus we know, came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Someone isn't wrong, a life of true flourishing, of the fruits of generosity and service has to be grounded in the pursuit of God and nourished by the Spirit. Jesus provided us a material example of what that life looks like. Paradoxically, being ever more firmly rooted in the knowledge and the love of the Lord makes us more able to move through the world as people of the cross. To be like trees walking.

Amen.