

A Sermon for DaySpring
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Drift or Delight
Psalm 1
September 22, 2024

So, we are in the season of Creation. In the Season of Creation, we are invited to bring a kind of openness to how the scripture and hopefully our actions lead us as creatures into communion with God the Creator. As we do this, we come right to the heart of Christian life, and as we do it today, we come right to the very first Psalm. The first Psalm in the Christian life are right in front of us this morning. I remember what theologian Joseph Sittler said as a word of encouragement in these matters, “When we turn the attention of the church to a definition of the Christian relationship with the natural world, we are not stepping away from grave and proper theological ideas; we are stepping right into the middle of them. There is a deeply rooted, genuinely Christian motivation for attention to God’s creation...” (Gravity and Grace, 4)

If that’s true, then attention to God’s creation has everything to do with God, everything to do with how we live our lives, and a whole lot to do with Jesus. Psalm 1, as we’ll see, helps us make these connections in powerful ways. Admittedly, even though there’s a tree by streams of water in the 3rd verse, we might not automatically read Psalm 1 as a creation-oriented psalm. But isn’t it? It’s about living in God’s ways and not drifting away, hardening our hearts, from those ways. The difference between the two ways is the difference between being a tree planted by a stream of water and being chaff that the wind blows away.

Echoing the concerns in our reading from James, there is a path to a good life and a path to destruction. The psalm begins: *Blessed are those who...* So we know from the beginning, the first psalm is about us in our relationship with God, which includes attention to God’s creation in our prayer and our actions.

The first verse of the first psalm warns of a 3 step move into a way of life that is out of tune with God’s word and ways. It’s as if to say we have to be careful and intentional to not slide in that direction because sliding that direction is the easiest thing that we can do. Blessed are we, then, if we are careful and attuned to the trouble because it takes intentionality to not skid that way. Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, stands not in the way of sinners, and sits not in the seat of scoffers.

This is an insightful picture of human nature--a drift in three acts. From walking in the counsel to standing in the path, to sitting in the seat. This plays out in all kinds of human life--I walk by the cupcakes on the counter. I stand by them and smell them and think about them. Before I know it, I’m sitting, smashing them into my mouth. The progression is really quite easy, the easiest thing in the world. It’s here right at the front, as the first word of all the psalms, this kind of progression into a life that we didn’t want to have.

The wisdom of God is the best and wisest way, but the way of God isn't usually the easy way. Intentionality on our part is required to choose the path of God's word and God's way. The name for that intentionality is discipleship, and it applies to every area of life, including our relationship with creation. The easy way is to slide away from God and God's way.

As a commentary on our life as creatures, we have slid—this is the connection with verse 1—we have slid—or rather flung ourselves as a species—over the last century and a half into an unfolding crisis of environmental degradation and suffering for creatures, the poor, and the planet. Humans are largely responsible for consequences of our actions that, while unintentional (we didn't mean to do it), and sometimes unforeseen (we didn't know that would happen), are still real and still severe. We, as a whole, didn't intend for this—I believe that. We didn't try to do this—I believe that... I don't think anyone is actively trying to wreck the planet. We just do what we do—we innovate, we consume, and are never satisfied. The proximate causes are legion—from industrialization and the burning of fossil fuels to relentless greed, exploding population growth, war, and on and on.

Threading through it all is a picture of—a gradual drift into more and more trouble. Like the parable of the frog in the pot that acclimates to the heat as it is being boiled. Like that frog, I guess, we normalize each increment toward trouble as just the way things are—as just natural. The way things are are the way things must be. And besides all this, we have plenty of other things to worry about. Plenty. And what would any of us really do about it anyway? Fine, read this week that the so-called doomsday glacier is collapsing faster than anyone thought. What exactly am I supposed to do about that? Well, read that CO2 in the atmosphere is on a pace to surpass yet another planetary threshold. That sounds bad, but what does that mean—I don't know what to do with that information. Ok, microplastics are turning the world's waters into “ocean soup”. That doesn't sound good. Maybe I can be sure my plastic ends up in a landfill instead of the ocean, I guess. But what difference does one person really make anyway? Take all this together, and we're stuck. But we're not really stuck in place—that would be one kind of problem. We're stuck sliding faster and faster into more and more trouble.

Extraordinary environmental degradation of the kind we see is the consequence of mundane decisions enacted over and over by people doing mundane things of daily life: going to work, feeding their families, running a business, fueling their cars, buying groceries. In modern life, we just drift: away from the soil; away from the animals; away from trees and streams and neighbors and compassion. In all of this, it seems, away from a way of life that creatures live blessed and as a blessing for creation. We drift, and it all feels as normal as we do. Even if maybe we feel anxiety that normal is not good, we don't know what we'd do about it anyway. So we just go on and on and on and get hardened to any talk about glaciers or warming or plastics. I know I feel this way.

We might not have expected it in the Psalm, but there it is. The first verse of the psalter mirrors this modern life. The first part of the psalm is not describing some kind of epic theological, spiritual, and moral struggle between good and evil that must be fought and won. Here there's no: “Choose you this day whom you will serve.” There's no prophetic call

to righteousness and against evil. Instead, it's a much more normal and ordinary picture of life, shuffling along a path only to realize—if you're even conscious enough to realize—that it's a path away from the life we are intended to have and share—a life that is blessed and a blessing.

This is the story human nature. The human story: *Prone I wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the Lord I love.*

This is on a large scale, a picture of our relationship with creation as modern people. It's no wonder, then, that actions that go against this flow feel strange and heroic, if not radical: like reusing something instead of just throwing it out; recycling, composting, or buying local fresh foods. It feels radical and weird. Someone should blow a trumpet when I drop off my cardboard and plastic. Where's my trophy for dealing with stinky compost? How is it that in 1944, Americans grew 40% of their vegetables in their backyards? And in 2024, it feels like a heroic act to keep one tomato plant alive. Why do things our grandparents did naturally feel so counter-cultural now? We can't just turn back the clock to a so-called simpler time, as if it were ever that. But let us see in the mirror of scripture, let us see the ways that we're drifting away from connection with creation, connection with God. That what we're experiencing and living, even if we're not conscious of it, we're drifting toward the shadow of a life lived disconnected from the creatures including one another and perhaps even ourselves. We feel that deep down.

I know all of this sounds dark. Because it is. But by looking into the mirror, we can see that we are not stuck, and we are not doomed. Whatever this slide is, it is not the way of blessing for us or our children. It is the way of dire consequences, the way of chaff blowing in the wind., and we're not fated to it. We are not bound to it. It doesn't have to be this way. And that's the good news. Christians, among anyone in the world, must remember this. This hope is planted within you, and you are not allowed to relinquish it. We are the memory-bearers, the bread bakers, the bread breakers, the incarnation-revolutionaries of the grace of the world.

We participate in the grace of God's world and the grace of God in the world. The church's ministry in this moment in time isn't just to produce moralistic little sermons and essays about smashing more cans into recycling bins, though why not do that? We have more to offer in our witness. Sittler wrote a generation ago in a book called *Gravity and Grace*, "There is an understanding of grace that has the magnitude of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The grace of God is not simply a holy hypodermic whereby my sins are forgiven. It is the whole giftedness of life, the wonder of life, which causes me to ask questions that transcend the moment."

Questions that transcend this moment lead open hearts to God's word and God's way. And this, we discover, is the way of delight. Is it surprising to see delight invoked in the 2nd verse of Psalm 1 in the light of the dark warnings of the opening verse? It's as if the antidote to the drift is delight. And of course that's not surprising. How would it be otherwise?

Blessed is the one whose delight is in God's word and God's way on which he meditates day and night.

We can't reduce hugely complex sociological, technological, planetary crises to simple solutions, but it may just be that something as simple as delight is the path out of this mess. Delight is as patient as a deep breath and as simple as a prayer of thanks. Delight is attentive and humble. Delight finds joy and finds hope. Delight is kind to others. The psalmist lights a candle in the darkness called Delight in God and blessed are you as you do. Blessed is the one who delights in the word and ways of the Lord, day and night.

If there is delight, it is delight in the face of despair. That's true for the psalmist's time and it's true in every time. It may be that the signature ministry of the church of Jesus Christ in a world of ecological despair is delight made possible by a contemplative life. Thomas Merton said that everything that is not contemplation is manipulation. What is contemplation? The practice of sabbath rest, a spirit of nonanxious patience, a spirituality of hopefulness. It's the humility Jesus showed when he took a child in his arms and said to his furrow-browed friends: "If you welcome a child such as this, you welcome me." It is as if to say if you receive the gift of the world with grace, you will welcome Christ and Christ's grace into your life, too.

Some live like chaff blown around in the wind. Some live like a tree planted by streams of water. There's the tree. You're like a tree planted by streams of water. What a lovely image. Jeremiah 17 takes it even further: "Your roots go down deep." You drink deeply from the water of life. You are grounded where you live. You're not afraid of the heat and drought, though they are real. You bear good fruit. Your life is rooted deep, and it reaches high. Your life offers shade and a home for others because you give hospitality to all those around you. You are called to drink deeply, live patiently, produce fruit. And there's one more thing about this image, if we may be so bold. One more thing about this tree as a picture of life worthy of delight. Each tree, as we know, metabolizes carbon dioxide from the air into oxygen we can breathe. In other words, a tree is created with perfect design to take death and give life.

A tree by the water in the very first psalm. A tree on Calvary on which our Lord was hung. The tree in the city of God at the end of Revelation. All take death and from it comes life.

Every tree is a tree of life for such a time as this. Blessed are the ones who delight in God's word and God's way. You, too, are trees planted by streams of water. As long as there are trees somewhere in the world, there is hope.

Amen.