

Psalm 1

Chaff or Oaks

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How then are we to live? How then are we to live? This query, this essential question, is bedrock and foundational for all of us who have a pulse and breathe and have our being, this question: *how are we to live* is posed in the middle of the bible, at the start of the Book of Psalms and then answered in the 149 psalms that follow.

The first psalm sets the task, poses the question and then, just in case we do not have the tenacity to keep on reading, the psalmist, succinctly answers the question.

How shall we live? Shall we hear the advice of the wicked or take the path of sinners, or sit with those who cynically scoff? No, for those who do that, are like chaff that the wind drives away. In the ancient world, when grain was harvested it was tossed in the air and then the wind would separate the outer bit, the light chaff, the husk would blow away, while the seed, the edible, heavy germ of the plant would fall to the ground to be collected, milled, and used. The wicked are like chaff, dust in the wind, says the psalmist, while the blessed, the happy ones, *“delight in the law of the Lord, they meditate day and night on God’s law, they are like trees, planted by streams of water, which yield fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither, in all they do they prosper,” (Psalm 1:2-3).*

So, I wonder, are we like chaff, thin husks, tumbled quicky in a light breeze? Are we chaff or aspen, oak, cottonwoods even: tall, gnarly thick bark, with tap roots deep in the earth, planted and flourishing by streams of water?

I know what it’s like to blow in the wind, I imagine some of you do also. But how do we live? How do we embody a “nowness,” a “hereness,” a groundedness, a rootedness in our world and in our faith?

Verse 2 in the first psalm offers the answer: *“Happy are those who delight in the Law of the Lord, on God’s law they meditate day and night.”*

The Law of the Lord...to many of us, believers or not, for many of us the law of the Lord, does not sound like anything in which we’d like to delight. We delight in chocolate, sunsets, a newborn baby, and puppy videos, but delighting in the law, sounds a lot like reveling in getting to write a book report, or enduring a two and a half hour zoom call. It might be necessary but its far from delightful.

And this is where I want to say, “I hear your pain, but I’d like for us to think again.”

There is a Jewish festival, that happens this time of year, it’s called *Simchat Torah*. It marks the annual end of reading the five books of the Torah—the law. Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. When the last passage, in Deuteronomy is finished, a great

celebration ensues. When I lived in New York, members of synagogues would routinely stream out onto the City Streets and the Torah would be processed and people would dance. It was a huge event. The idea being that the law, God's law is not so much rules and rubrics which constrain our lives, rather it's a gift from God, given to us, a foundation upon which we construct our lives always inviting gracious accountability to God and to each other. For devout people of the Jewish faith, God's law, the Torah is a pathway toward hope and holiness, steadfastness and groundedness. Meditating on its meaning, knowing, and reveling in its contents is a means by which they mark and celebrate the gifts of life and endure the changes, chances, and challenges of our world.

Some of you know that in another part of my life, I coach and I guide sea kayaking nationally and internationally. I've guided trips in Scotland, Mexico, Canada, New Zealand and here in the Midwest.

One of things about guiding, is that I and whomever else I happening to be working, we are responsible for the safety, well-being, adventure, and fun of the participants. Any of you who may have gone on a trip like this will know that your guides are preparing your meals, helping you set up your tent, offering tips to enhance your paddling skills, trying to find super fun places and sites for you to see, never letting you get bored, as well as keeping you from too much fear or danger. It is an extremely intense job. It's physically demanding, the days typically begin well before dawn and usually don't end until 10 or so at night. When I first started guiding, I was consumed by anxiety. How was going to get it all done? What had I forgotten? It was so incredibly stressful that it was super hard to even take in the beautiful places in which I was paddling, because the reality is, that on those trips I'm in charge of the safety and wellbeing, the lives of everyone on the trip.

The more I immersed myself in the craft. The more I worked with amazing mentors and learned from them, I began to develop systems. Steps and practices and routines that began to be imbedded in soul. So much so, even when I'm not actually guiding a full-fledged trip, even if I'm just doing a day paddle, a short hike, anything that may involve me caring for another person while doing something active and physical, I intuitively begin to use my systems.

One of my clergy colleagues, even noticed the emergence of the systems when we were doing the bike rides with the bishop, fairly low-key events with very few possibilities for encountering sea monsters. But still those systems were there to mediate my anxiety and ensure that people were as safe as possible.

Friends, I believe that our faith can offer us a framework, a matrix of spiritual systems that enable us, flawed and gifted people that we are to thrive, to create communities of meaning that address the ills and evils of our world.

Our world is as dynamic and turbulent as any body of water on which I have paddled. Our faith can assist us in safely traversing the sea of our lives. If we have worked at our faith, if we have internalized it, if we have meditated on God's word, wrestled with it individually and in community.

Experience has taught me that my faith, our faith, will not be strong enough to meet the challenges of our lives if our religious practices are activities in which we just periodically dip our paddles. Instead, we need to immerse ourselves for it to matter.

So, I wonder, what if we were to do an immersion now, this fall? What if we were to use the Book of Psalms as our sea of wisdom?

What if we were to study these beautiful, musical, pieces of writing and each day, morning by morning, and learn from them.

How then will we live our lives?

What if we were to, as psalmist writes, meditate on God's law day and night?

Shall we be husks that blow in the wind or mighty oaks with deep roots?

The choice is ours and make no mistake—the choice matters.

Amen.