

Psalm 119:1-16 “I Will Never Hang My Head”

Last week we shined a spotlight on the Psalm that the lectionary gave us. Because we're a Christian Church, we tend to spend a lot of time in the New Testament, because that's where we find the story of Jesus and the challenges of the early churches. We don't ignore the Old Testament, but we don't visit it as often as we probably should, and when we do, we really don't dig into the Psalms because we think they speak for themselves. That's why we typically use the lectionary Psalm as kind of a supplementary reading for the “main event” scripture. In other words, last week's focus on Psalm 34 was the exception, not the norm. But since fifth Sundays are when we usually do something out of the ordinary as far as music goes, I thought it would be good to keep looking into the Psalms.

This week's text is from the longest Psalm in the Bible. It has 176 verses, which I imagine Kathy is grateful that I only decided to focus on the first 16 verses. Here's some trivia about this Psalm – Like last week's Psalm and most of the others, it's a song of praise. This one is usually called “In Praise of God's Torah,” which refers to the first five books of the Bible that contain the Law of Moses. But if you read the entire Psalm, you realize that it's about a lot more than just “praise for the Torah.” If you read this book in the original Hebrew, you'll notice that it is an alphabetical acrostic poem, which in the Hebrew language is 27 letters beginning with Aleph and ending with Tav. So really what you have here is 27 poems that include praises, petitions, laments, meditations, and dedications and each one begins with a letter in the alphabet. Most scholars classify Psalm 119 as being part of the Hebrew wisdom tradition which makes it more like the book of Proverbs than anything else. Think of this psalm as wisdom in poetry form.

This morning we're dealing with the letters Aleph and Beit. Aleph starts out in verse one with “Happy are those whose way is blameless” and Beit starts out in verse nine with “How can young people keep their way pure?” What makes people happy and what keeps young people pure?

Following the Law of Moses! Just how happy is happy? Happy is never having to hang your head in shame ... happy is knowing that you are never alone ... happy is knowing that God is your chief resource for helping you keep God's commandments. When you read the Psalms, you start seeing patterns and similarities. For me, this passage sounds like the beginning of Psalm 1 which was the first psalm I ever memorized 45 years ago in Eldora Flick's Vacation Bible School class –

“Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.”

And of course the reward I received for memorizing that Psalm in the King James Version was ... (?) ... you got it: Rice Krispy Treats! Are Rice Krispy treats what makes people happy and what keeps young people pure? No. What keeps people happy and what keeps young people pure is the law. Whose law? God's Law as revealed in the Law of Moses. Well okay, but there's a lot of words in those first five books in the Bible. That's a lot of law to memorize. There are entire chapters dedicated to what foods you can and can't eat. There are chapters about how you shouldn't sacrifice children. I mean, why is that even a thing? Of course you don't sacrifice children! There's a chapter devoted to how and where you should dig a latrine and multiple chapters about how to be a temple priest. Let's say you were a young person in the church today and you read the chapter in Leviticus that outlines that which is clean and that which is unclean. A young person in the church today might say, “Call me naïve, but I think our pastor might be in trouble because I saw him tossing a football around with his kids last week, and I'm absolutely sure he ate Aunt Sally's crab salad at the potluck a few months ago. I'm pretty sure that this Law of Moses that I just read says that he has to get stoned now which I heard is legal in California.” Again, this is confusing for a kid. This is a *lot*! Okay, so let's see if we can break it down into something simpler.

In both the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy there is a list of ten commandments on which the Law is built. Ten laws is a lot easier to get your head wrapped around than the 613 laws listed in those first five books of the Bible. But even then, ten is a hard number to remember, and some of these commandments are hard for a kid to understand. I'm sure kids understand, "love God, honor your parents, don't steal and don't lie" but what does "covet" mean? What is a "graven image?" What does it mean to take the Lord's name in vain? Are we talking about vain as in "hopeless" or vain like "arrogant?" What is "adultery?" True story – when I was maybe 12 or 13 years old, my friend Steve called to tell me his parents were getting a divorce. Of course, I was sad to hear this and he was obviously upset. I listened to him for a while and then I asked if he knew why they were getting divorced. He said, "I'm not sure. Do you know what 'adultery' is?" Sadly, at the age of 13, I did not. See, this is still potentially confusing, especially for a young person in search of happiness and purity.

Thankfully God sent Jesus into this world to help us understand God's ways and to reconcile human beings to God. Jesus didn't always get along with the religious leaders who looked down on those who didn't follow those 613 laws to a "t." He pushed back on their hypocrisy and challenged them to embrace the spirit of the law rather than just the letter of the law. In Matthew 22:36-40 an expert in the Law of Moses asked Jesus what the most important commandment in the Law was. Jesus said, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now *there's* something that a person of *any* age can get their heads wrapped around. "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." According to our Psalm, this is the key to happiness, and this is the way by which young and old alike can keep

their ways pure. I'm not saying that this makes *following* the law any easier, but it's a great place to start as far as understanding it goes. That's when we can boldly pray,

“With my whole heart I seek you; I will treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you.”

Let's put that into practice then. Let's figure out how to make something that's simple to understand but hard to follow a part of our daily practice.

Verse 5 says, “Walk steadfast” in God's ways. In other words, be consistent. Be steady. Walk the path. How do we learn to master something? Through practice! We can't expect perfection because we human beings are not perfect. But we can certainly work toward progress. It is God who perfects us.

Verse 6-8 encourages us to observe God's statues and to keep our eyes fixed on them. Sometimes it's hard to keep our eyes fixed on anything simply because there's so many things that can and will distract us. That's one of the trickiest parts of practicing prayer and meditation. Our little squirrel brains have difficulty keeping our attention on one thing at a time. How can we stay attentive? Same principle as verse five – through practice. Make it a part of your daily routine. If you miss a day, don't give up trying. It's never too late to start a new day again. Progress not perfection.

Verse 11 encourages us to “treasure God's word in our hearts.” How do we do this? Well, you can't treasure something unless you see the value in it. We find God's word in this book. And it's hard to see the value of the Book if you don't crack it open and read it now and then. And if you say, “Well, it's hard to read and it's hard to understand,” then I know a great place where you can come together with other “treasure hunters” who are looking to understand it too.

The psalmist writes, “I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches.” Let’s be honest. Who isn’t delighted when some riches come your way? Think about how you feel when you pull that rain coat out of the closet after going months without needing it, and then when you reach inside your pocket, you find money! Any amount feels like a treat. Sometimes it’s loose change ... maybe a few quarters, a dime or a penny or two. You feel blessed! Sometimes it’s a \$20 bill. How wonderful is that? It doesn’t even have to be money. You wouldn’t believe how many times I find a favorite pen or a flashlight or a water bottle or a pair of sunglasses that I thought I’d lost. Knowing that we have access to words of wisdom that have been passed on to humans from the creator and sustainer of the universe and then passed down generation to generation through people who are created in God’s image and gifted with the divine spirit that connects us all together is a treasure for sure.

Finally, the psalmist writes, “I will delight in your laws, and I will not forget your word.” I don’t know about you, but I can be forgetful. Even more so when I’ve got too many things going on in my life. I feel like my days are all about responding to whatever crisis grabs my attention first. I feel like I’m just spreading my neglect. And I’m not alone. So many people are just worn out from fires, pandemics, discord, personal health issues, grief ... you name it ... and they feel they’re lucky they can even remember to do some of the most basic things in life like brushing their teeth or remembering to feed the cat or dog or paying the phone bill. For a lot of folks, life feels like *a lot*. And yet, here we are ... gathered together as a community of faith. Not a community of “certainty” or a community that can lay claim to knowing everything. We are a community of faith because we put our trust in the One who gets us ... who understands us. One who has created us from the dust of the earth but yet will never leave us in the dust. Praise be to God.