

Watering our roots

Menno Mennonite Church

February 13, 2022

Purpose: To remind ourselves of the rootedness that sustains us.

Message: As we follow God, we are invited to trust our deepest roots to sustain us in the good and the bad.

Scriptures: Jeremiah 17:5-10 (Sermon Text, I will read); Psalm 1 (please read)

Synopsis: There are those coffee mug endorsements of faith—the moments and texts that market well and comfort us in the way they are meant to: we, the righteous, do well because that is who we are. Yet our times and lives far surpass the limitations of our coffee cup theologies.

We know something of the trees planted by the water. In a place where there are simply no trees absent water, we can tell where the water is and is not. But we also know that simply being planted do not, necessarily guarantee success. The drought will come; the winds will blow; the stress will be present. It is our rooting—that which lies deep and holds fast—that holds us. This is not a function of our righteousness our lack thereof (a possible reading of the Psalm) but rather the position of our trust and identity of being rooted and grounded in God's love.

Jeremiah 17:5-10

⁵Thus said the Lord:

Cursed is the one who trusts in humankind,
Who makes mere flesh their strength,
And turns their thoughts from the Lord.

⁶They shall be like a bush in the desert,
Which does not sense the coming of good:
It is set in the scorched places of the wilderness,
In a barren land without inhabitant.

⁷Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,
Whose trust is the Lord alone.

⁸They shall be like a tree planted by waters,
Sending forth its roots by a stream:

It does not sense the coming of heat,
Its leaves are ever fresh;
It has no care in a year of drought,
It does not cease to yield fruit.

⁹Most devious is the heart;
It is perverse—who can fathom it?

¹⁰I the Lord probe the heart,
Search the mind—

To repay every one according to their ways,
With the proper fruit of their deeds.

Growing up, I had a distinct view of the Old Testament. Call it the fuzzy vision highlight tour. You had in the beginning with all the animals and all that which leads to Noah, complete with a little ark play set. We then jumped to Moses and the action hero story—born in questionable circumstances, floated in a basket, comes back crying let my people go and crossing the Red Sea. There is something about frogs falling from the sky that captures a young boy's brain. There were songs about Joshua fitting the battle Jericho and Father Abraham, sung for the sake of the accompanying motions much more than any lessons about progeny or the sacking of great cities. Through in a couple Psalms that are good to memorize, a story about a giant fish swallowing some guy whole, and some well selected prophetic quotations about doing justly and walking humbly, and that was pretty much it. The Old Testament was presented as a more or less benign collection of allegories out of which one was to go do likewise, no more particularly disturbing than the brothers Grimm that we might read as a bedtime story, only it is real.

Not that this notion survived initial contact with the text itself. When you crack open the Old Testament, you quickly grasp that the rest of story is a whole lot messier than are inclined to think about. Jonah is running away and swallowed by a fish sent by God because he did not want to pronounce that which God ordained. Moses as a leader had a nasty penchant for ending his sentences and ordinances of law with the words “lest you die” as in do this or else. The earth, created in beauty and harmony becomes the scene of deceit, rape, and murder, regardless of what happened with the apple of the tree of good and evil. God takes a bet with the evil powers and subject those who love him to unendurable torture, just to see if they stay true, and tests his servants with the destruction of their beloved first born. Even the heroes of the story are unsavory. David fixes the system to get into bed to his neighbor's wife, Abraham has children with the help just in case God forgot about him. That nice Noah story ending with a rainbow starts with a despairing God who has given up on creation, so literally flushes it. And this is PG version. If it is in the darker shade of the human character, it is in the Old Testament.

There is more than enough here to give one pause to consider what these insane stories and horrific violence could ever do with a loving and compassionate God. Christians have long struggled with what to do with the Hebrew scriptures. There were those who want to excise them entirely—it was there in the very beginning and continues today. Given my choice of the various readings of the lectionary that always have old, new, Gospel and psalms to choose from, I almost always pick anything but the old. Often times, consciously or not, we pit old and new testaments,

the YHWH of wrath versus the Jesus of compassion and love. The logic is simple—Jesus came to satisfy the mean old man in the sky and all the law and other nonsense that we have been told about him, therefore we don't need to worry about what came before. Even calling it the Old Testament tells us what we really ought to think; this is the previous, not quite ready for prime-time God who is being testified to here, and without the New context of grace it would not be worth the read. We put YHWH over here in all the cranky law-bound nastiness, and Jesus, full of grace, hope and peace, over here, ready to duke it out with all that came before, making right what once went terribly wrong. It's the rumble in the theological jungle and we know who's going to win.

And this works for a little while. Until you realize that Jesus was not actually a Christian. He was a Jew, and always kept pointing back to YHWH. As a rabbi who knew his Bible, he quoted it A LOT. And his Bible is the Hebrew texts that we know today in all their blood-soaked glory. The New Testament quotes and expounds upon the Hebrew text over 2200 times. Jesus starts his ministry with words of Isaiah and dies on the cross with the words of Psalm 22 on his lips, and in between actively and persistently interprets the scriptures of old time and time again. The epistolary writers like Paul were all about the Old Testament and how it fits into who Jesus was and what he was about, applying the law in the light of Christ who came. Jesus points not back to a broken system calling for it to be burned to the ground, but rather as the precedent that informs his life, and the movement of the Spirit that calls him forward. We are enriched as we strive understand the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ by having the indispensable resource of knowing the context which grounds Christ's action, his life, and his calling.

You may be forgiven if you think that our texts for this morning sound as though they rhyme or might be written with the same pen. Though hundreds of years apart, Psalm 1 and this snippet of Jeremiah seem to answer the same question: the prescription for happiness is the reliance on the Lord. When one is rooted in the word, that root it what sustains. Jeremiah writes here to critique the tactics of the power brokers who were looking to make shrewd alliances with Egypt rather than connecting with YHWH God. The Psalmist is imparting the wisdom of the ages as the way of happiness. But the advice is the same in either place—know where you are rooted, how you are grounded and from whence you come. This is something that Jesus knew well and taught better, connecting with the long story of salvation to the fulfillment of intent and

the hope of God. These stories, messy as they are remaining the rooting forces that hold us fast and nourish us deep when it comes to the way of life and living. It is true for Jesus and it is true for us today. It is God's faithfulness that will hold us, water us and sustain us no matter what.

One problem of reducing these texts and their wisdom sayings to just that which can fit on the side of a coffee mug is that it denies the broader rooting available to us within their promises. When we read "Cursed are those who trusts humankind" and "Blessed is the one who trusts the name of the Lord" and the like, there is little doubt where we understand ourselves to be as readers as we parse this. We are not given to consider the ways we ourselves might be inclined toward the earthly wisdom or consider where might be planted. It is easy to take on the role of evaluating who is planted where by the way that we evaluate their fruit, especially relative to our own.

Being well planted and soundly rooted in the way of God—as told in the New and Old—does not exempt us from moments that will test our endurance. We are subject—all of us—to the realities of the world as it is. Not matter where we find ourselves planted, the winds will come, the drought does come, the blizzards will blow. There is nothing in either text that would alter that from being the case. The point of being rooted and grounded in the way of YHWH, to celebrating the way of righteousness is not to declare our own superiority, but rather to recall that at the very moment we need our strength the most we need not rely on our strength alone. We can rely on the deep roots that reach down to the life-giving reserves of the way that YHWH has been in the world—all it—and through all of it to water us not just for survival but for new growth and new hope. We can recall that so long as our roots hold fast in the Love of God which has been from the very beginning and continues today, no matter what the mess, we will not be left alone. We can rejoice in the times of challenge not because we crave the satisfaction of self-identity but because we can trust the God who has been faithful through it all and in it all, many times over.

On reflection, we ought not be surprised at what is in the text, at the stories told in the Bible. Because we know this is how the world is. Our world looks a whole lot like the Old Testament: just as violent, petulant, cranky, and treacherous as the world of the ancients ever was. The stories that we tell are just as full of every sort of evil. The leaders fail with in just as much spectacular ways. There are still consequences to decisions and indecision. Pride still

leads us into war where thousands are killed and maimed—it is trying to do so even today, and we have gotten rather good at blowing stuff up.

The Old Testament, the Bible is nothing if not a worldly book. It tells the story of a world which is bound and determined to go its own way, and a people who are called to be different, and find it routinely impossible to do so. It is in this light—as brutally realistic and unflattering to the human condition as it may be—that the story of God who reaches out time and again to the world is told. We are told again and again that God’s hope reaches out, God’s love restores, God’s justice challenges, and that God’s way that wins in the end. These are our roots. This is our foundation. It is these waters that we are nourished to bear fruit.

The Old Testament reminds us that even in the worst of us, that of God remains. And where God is, there too is love, hope, and peace. It is here in these promises of seeking the way of the Lord that we are rooted and held ever fast. This is enough to see us through any drought, and challenge, any disappointment, no matter what. For it is God who gives the growth when we but trust the one who has been with us all along.