

The Life of Joy

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Psalm 1; Psalm 150
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
March 13, 2022 – Lent II

As some of you know, the book of Psalms is – pretty much hands down – my favorite book in the Bible. In the title of today's sermon, that is because the psalms lead us into the life of joy. And they lead us into in that life of joy in all of its thickness and complexity, which eventually yields in complete and unambiguous praise. When we allow the Psalms – and biblical faith more generally – to shape our experience of joy, it turns out that the life of joy is not, as the world would tell you, about accumulating a lot of stuff. Enduring joy is not found by accumulating possessions, or approval, or security, or control. A joy that endures is about being able to answer the question, "How do I want to live?" and then living as much as possible from those guiding principles.

The psalms are given to us as a *tool for our formation*. They are given to us to shape and form us, over the course of our lives, into persons of joy.

Our 2 psalms today, which Dave read, are the boundaries of the Psalter, the term that is given to the entire final collection of psalms. [To Sound of Music song:] "We start at the very beginning; it's a very good place to start." Psalm 1 is the entrance to the *psalter*, and we may imagine that Psalm 1, which is about faithful obedience, is given to us as the entrance to the life of joy. Psalm 150 is the conclusion of the psalter, and we may imagine that Psalm 150, which is all about praise, is given to us as the ultimate destination or conclusion of the life of joy. "Praise the Lord! Praise, praise, praise, praise, praise." 13 times in 6 little verses. Praise, praise, praise. The life of joy begins in faithful obedience, and the life of joy ends in praise. That is what the Psalms teach us.

The way the psalter has been edited and arranged, the life of joy begins in faithfulness and obedience. Psalm 1 reads: "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked...but their delight is in the law, the Torah, the teaching, the instruction of the Lord. They are like trees planted by streams of water, their leaves never wither. Into old age, they have a freedom, a lightness, and a twinkle in their eye."

"The wicked," those who refuse the life of mercy, refuse the life of justice, refuse the life of generosity, those who organize their lives and systems apart from grace and apart from love and apart from the presence of God, are not so. They don't have any roots, they don't have any lasting substance, they are consumed with anxiety and greed, and will have no enduring resilience, so that they will blow away like

tumbleweeds when times get tough. Psalm 1 shows us two paths. Faithful obedience leads to life, sinful wickedness leads to death.

Faithful attentiveness to God, obedience to God's teaching and instruction, is the entrance to the life of joy, according to Psalm 1, just as we tell our children to eat their vegetables, wear their seat belts, and do their homework, and things will go well. Some people might think that you can simply read Psalm 1 and then jump right to the praise at the end of the book.

But by the time we finish middle school, we begin to realize that things are not quite that simple. You can eat all your vegetables, go to practice all week long, and still get cut from the team. You can go to church every week, tithe and give to the poor, and still experience a breakdown in your relationships. You can do everything you're supposed to do, and the world can still come unraveled around you. Transactional religion, where we make a deal with God that if I do x, y, and z, then you, God, need to make my life come out the way I like, transactional religion turns out not to be a guarantee.

That creates a problem. You can feel the two pitfalls that becoming aware of the limitations of transactional religion presents. On the one hand, there is the temptation to double down on the absolute truth of the two paths of Psalm 1, and to rigidly insist that if bad things have happened to you, then it must be your fault, and to disregard any evidence to the contrary. You must have done something to deserve it. This, for example, is what Job's friends do in the Old Testament book of Job. This is the pitfall of fundamentalism, that refuses to honor the pain of the world. On the other hand, there is the temptation to fully acknowledge the ways that the two paths of Psalm 1 have not worked out, and to say the whole thing is a crock, to say that the evidence proves that the life of faith is hollow and a sham, and that you might as well give up and try to accumulate as much as you can. This is the pitfall of secularism, which refuses to see God's presence in the pain of the world.

What the book of Psalms invites us to is a 3rd path, of faithful engagement with God in the thick midst of all of the painful evidence around us. In the life of joy, you cannot simply skip from Psalm 1 to 150. In the life of joy, formed by the psalms, you go through the entire collection, psalm by psalm. Now we obviously don't have time to do the entire collection today, but I do want to invite you to take out your Bible for what we'll call a sightseeing visit to the book of Psalms, to get a taste of the terrain, and then I want to invite you to return to this land on your own.

The life of joy, formed by the psalms, does not proceed evenly or in a straight line from faithfulness to praise. Our real lives are far too messy for that to be the case. And because the psalms are given to us for our real lives, they also do not proceed in a straight line from faithfulness to praise. If you turn to Psalm 3 – Psalm 3! We've barely started! – it begins, "O Lord, how many are my foes!" Right away, we're situated in a

prayer of great conflict and torment. Psalm 13 drives it deeper: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But then things are more settled in the next one, Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Psalm 56 leans hard into God: "Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me; all day long foes oppress me." Psalm 66 exults: "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth." Psalm 86 pleads: "Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy." Then Psalm 96: "O sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord, all the earth." Psalm 109 growls: "Do not be silent, O God of my praise. For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues." Psalm 130 howls from the bottom: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." Tears fall from Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept." Psalm 140, quite near the end of the collection: "Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers; protect me from those who are violent."

We cannot simply skip from the obedience of Psalm 1 to the praise of Psalm 150. Life is far too complicated for that. We must go psalm by psalm. As you came in this morning, you were given a sheet of paper with a monthly schedule for reading through the psalms. This schedule comes from our siblings in the Episcopal church. I've taped this schedule to the inside front cover of the Bible I use at home for devotions. Each day, you can read the assigned psalms; there's one set for the morning, and one set for the evening. By the end of a single month, you will have gone through the entire Psalter. Then you start over again the next month. Imagine the vocabulary of prayer that you will have acquired after a year of this spiritual practice. Your conversational range with God will have increased so much.

By the time someone praying through the psalms gets to Psalm 150, that person has come through all of the struggles and thanksgivings and angers and complaints and praises of the entire book. This is no hollow or shallow praise that is being sung here. It is more like a couple in their 70s, renewing the wedding vows that they made when they were in their 20s. They are saying, "I love you," just as they did when they were 25. But those three words now carry all of the history that they have as a couple. In a very real sense, the person who prays Psalm 150 bears the history and the scars of the rest of the book, scars which come to us through life, scars which are shared with God in our prayer. It is an honest and a weathered faith that prays Psalm 150, and it is that honest and weathered faith that, as the hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" puts it, is lost in wonder, love, and praise.

The psalms invite us to the life of joy, in which we share everything with God. To God and to God alone be all the glory. Amen.