

Sermon for Sunday, May 17, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

The first thing I thought of
when I read the psalm today
was the Pharrell Williams song “Happy”
from the movie Despicable Me 2.

If there’s anything that epitomizes the word “happy”,
it’s that song. The lyrics don’t make a lot of sense,
but somehow just listening to it
makes you feel cheerful.

But the happy that begins
our psalm today
isn’t exactly the sort of happy
that Pharrell Williams was singing about.

This is one of those times
when the process of translating Scripture
from its original language of Hebrew
into our language
doesn’t quite work.
Because languages often
don’t quite match up;
one word in one language
might have multiple meanings in the other,
or there might not even be
a direct equivalent.

And then there are the poetic dimensions of language,
things like rhythm and rhyme and alliteration and assonance
which are almost impossible to capture
in another language.

And all that together
means that sometimes

we totally misinterpret
what is being said.

And that's how it is
with the word happy
in our psalm today,
and with the whole psalm.

At face value
it seems like this psalm might be a piece of Hebrew wisdom
about how to live a happy life.

After all,
that's what we all want, isn't it?
To be happy?

It's certainly the subject
of plenty of magazine articles
and online quizzes
and psychological research.

But is it really
what our psalm is talking about?

In Hebrew, the psalm begins this way:

אֲשֶׁר לֹא הָלַךְ, בְּעֵצַת רָשָׁעִים; -- אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהִים;
ashrey- ha'ish asher lo halak b:atzat r'sha'iyim

The first word
is happy.

Or at least, that's how it's translated in the Book of Common Prayer, and in the New Revised Standard Version of the bible, the one we do our readings from.

In the King James Version, translated in the early seventeenth century,
it was translated blessed.

And in the contemporary version, The Message,
it's translated as being liked by God.

And all of those have a connection with the Hebrew word
אֲשֶׁרִי (ash-rey).

It can mean happy or blessed, or approved.

But to really understand it

we need to dig deeper.
 אַשְׁרֵי (ash-rey) actually comes from a word
 that describes a piece of rope
 stretched out tight, one that is absolutely straight.

And that contrasts with the word at the end of that first line of the first verse
 רָשָׁעִים (rasha'im).
 Most times, it's translated "wicked" or "ungodly" or "living in the way of evil."

But its root, rasha, means to wander off the path, whether on purpose or accidentally.

And did you notice the similarity of the two words,
 ashrey, rasha.
 They are almost the same, with the consonants just mixed up.

It seems like whoever wrote the psalm
 did this deliberately,
 to emphasize the contrast.
 It's two extremes of life,
 one that is nice and straight, and one that is backwards, wobbling off all over the place.

And the way that is straight,
 perhaps we might call it, the good life,
 is described in three ways:
 The first is
 not hanging out with people who are trouble.

Common sense, isn't it? The sort of thing your parents told you, and you in turn told
 your children?
 I don't want you spending too much time with that boy: he's trouble.

My five year old nephew used to have a favorite show that he watched on Youtube, called
 Horrid Henry.
 Horrid Henry
 is a mischievous boy. And Horrid Henry has a brother, Perfect Peter.
 You can guess which one my nephew began to imitate.
 A hint - it wasn't Perfect Peter.
 And eventually he got banned from watching Horrid Henry,
 because, of course, he began to act like his hero.

And it doesn't stop when we are kids.
Because there's nothing more likely to make you make bad decisions
than hanging out with other people
who make bad decisions.
We absorb their values.
And whether it's because we want their approval, or we want to be like them,
or we just have that naughty urge inside of us,
when we spend time with people who are trouble,
we get in trouble too.

Though of course the opposite is also true.
The psalm doesn't say it, but it's implied -
hang out with people who are happy, who are blessed, who are approved,
we will become like them.

And there's a second description of those who live a good life.
They meditate on the law of God
day and night.
And the word for law here is Torah,
the first five books of the bible.
These are the stories of creation,
of Noah and the flood,
of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
of Moses and Miriam and the escape from Egypt,
of the wanderings in the wilderness
and their arrival on the brink of the promised land.
These are the stories of the laws God gave them,
the tablets of stone with the ten commandments,
the detailed explanations
of how to live
as the people of God.
Those who live a good life
know their own story,
the story of their God and of their faith.

Unlike the wicked.
They've forgotten more
than they ever knew.
God has never been a priority for them.

They like belonging to the people of God
by virtue of their family connections,
but if they had to show up in court
and proved their faith,
they wouldn't have any
supporting evidence.

And the third description of the people who live a good life
is a metaphor.

They are like a tree.
A tree that has been planted in a good site,
that has deep roots
that reach down for water and food.
Those deep roots
mean that they can withstand strong winds;
their branches provide homes
for all sorts of bugs and birds and other critters..

And the wicked? They're like chaff, the waste material from the harvest.
They don't support any life - they have no nutritional value -
and they blow away
at the slightest breath of a breeze.

On one hand, the blessed.
On the other, the wicked.

So what?

There are two ways of reading this psalm - actually probably more than two, but lets stick
with two for the time being.

One is
to see it as a declaration.
This is how the world is.
You are on one side
or the other.
Get used to it.

But there's a second way of reading it.
What if, instead of being a declaration,
this psalm

is an invitation?

An invitation

to be counted among the happy, counted among the blessed.

That makes sense

of this being the first psalm.

If it's a declaration: you're in, you're out,

then there's no point

going any further,

It would be like reading a novel where it says at the end of the first chapter,

if you're left handed, read on. If you're right handed, don't bother.

But if it's an invitation, then there's room for all of us.

It's an invitation to discover more about God,

an invitation to grow our roots longer and deeper,

an invitation to hang out

with God's friends.

And that's a wonderful thing.

It reminds me

of what Jesus did

as he travelled around the holy land,

stopping by the lake

to chat with some fishermen,

looking up into the tree

to find the taxman, Zacchaeus,

meeting late at night with the religious leader, Nicodemus.

Each time

he invited them to follow him.

They didn't need to be perfect;

they didn't need to have it all together;

all they needed

was to be willing to take the risk

of spending time with him.

And those that did,

found

that they were blessed.

And the same invitation is there for us.

Unfortunately, we don't get to hang out with Jesus himself.

But we can hear what he said, as we read scripture.

We can get to know him in prayer.
We can hang out with other people
who know what it is to be his friend,
who know what it is to be blessed.

And as we do, we'll find our roots go deeper,
and our faith grows stronger,
and we will be sustained when things are tough
and offer shelter to others, when things are good.
And we will indeed be blessed.