



Roanoke, Virginia

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## ***“Trees in Plain Sight”***

*Part IV of the Sermon Series “Advent in Plain Sight”*

*Psalm 1, Isaiah 11:1 (1-9)*

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I look forward to returning to the Dominican Republic with this year’s Medical/Construction team. The pandemic has delayed this return by two years. I am anxious to see the progress that has been made on one of the projects of our Mission Build Campaign; the building of a hospital to replace the clinic that sits in a floodplain. The hospital is almost complete, though it needs equipping and furnishing.

What has not begun is the construction of a new guesthouse to replace the old one, also in the floodplain. Right now, the guesthouse is only a dream. And some of us having been to the site have dreamed. We dream of a guesthouse built on the back side of the property. The view over the south wall is spectacular; farmland leading to tree-covered mountains. We imagine this guest house would have a nice rooftop sitting area where in the cooler temperature of dawn or dusk we can sit and enjoy watching the sun rise to the left or set to the right.

It is the trees that make the mountains so beautiful.

It is trees, and the lack of them, that define the island itself. Many who have gone on these mission trips have noticed in looking down from the plane that the Dominican half of Hispaniola is forested, and the Haitian half is denuded. Haiti is bare from trees being cut and used as fuel, grinding poverty, corrupt government, and poor land management.

On the island, trees are a symbol of life and potential. Their presence feels like potential, their absence feels like judgment.



We can understand that. We enjoy how trees add beauty, texture, and color to landscapes. We enjoy their shade. And we know that forests are the lungs of the world with their capacity to absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen.

Still, I doubt that we can appreciate how much a tree was a metaphor for life as did the writers of scripture, such as the seer of Proverbs and Jesus who spoke of the “[Tree of Life](#)” and its fruit.

Especially most Americans who, when we hear trees we think of the dominant trees of our country: Maple, Oak, Fir, Pine, even Aspen.

Not so, in Israel. It is amazing how much of what is served in Israel is plucked from trees: pomegranates, figs, apples, pears, apricots, plums, almonds and, of course, olives. If, in biblical times, bread was thought to sustained life, it was the fruit of trees that added so much flavor.

Every person who has ever lived in Israel knows what it is to bite the fig and find if it is sweet or if it is not, or the olive and find it dry or flush with oil, or the apple and find it sweet, sour, or bitter.

So, in hearing biblical poets and prophets speak of trees, *think of fruit-bearing trees* with fruit that delights or disappoints.

With that mind frame, listen to the poem of Psalm 1:

#### Psalm 1

<sup>1</sup> Happy are those  
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
or sit in the seat of scoffers;  
<sup>2</sup> but their delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law they meditate day and night.  
<sup>3</sup> They are like trees  
planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.  
In all that they do, they prosper.  
<sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.  
<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;  
<sup>6</sup> for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

My other passage from Isaiah was read by Ben last week. In his sermon, he focused on images of peace; particularly the image of the lion lying with the lamb. I am going to focus on a different image contained in the first verse. In fact, I'll only read that verse.



Isaiah 11:1

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

Psalm 1 speaks to the kind of life we-  
when we are at our best, anyway-  
hope to live:  
a life grounded in God's Word.

Like a tree rooted beside the stream, we want to absorb what God has to offer so that it becomes part of us. We want to draw into ourselves the *living water of God's love and grace* so that it becomes a part of who we are. Can it be? If God's love can become incarnate—if God's love can become flesh in the person of Jesus—then maybe God's love can become a part of our flesh and bones as well. Maybe the love we absorb drawing on the river of grace can become the fruit we offer the world.

Why would we want to do that? The poem says that it is because *we want to be happy*. The poem reads as if answering the question, “**What must I do to be happy?**” The answer? “**Happy are those who delight in the Law of God?**”

In my first sermon of 2021, I talked about the sort of happiness the psalmist means.<sup>1</sup> Now on this, the last sermon of the year, I want to remind you what I said. I described two sorts of happiness. There is what Aristotle called *hedonic* happiness, which is a feeling, a sensation or momentary pleasure, a happiness highly dependent on circumstances outside of oneself. Those who seek that sort of happiness are easily manipulated as consumers and followers.

The other sort of happiness, the happiness the psalm 1 talks about, is what Aristotle called *eudaemonic* happiness. It is a lasting sense of well-being that comes from “**living a good, meaningful, and worthy life.**”<sup>2</sup> It is a happiness that starts within as one seeks to be true to one's identity and values. I recently posted on Facebook a quote by the singer with the stage name, *Nightbirde*, that perfectly expresses this second sort of happiness. The circumstances of the singer would cause many misery for she has been living with, and fighting, cancer. She was introducing her song, “It's OK,” and said this, “**You can't wait for life to stop being hard to find a reason to be happy.**”

That's my favorite quote of a pandemic year.

But the quote doesn't go far enough for the poet of Psalm 1. In speaking of happiness, his interest is not only in the happiness of the individual, the one who draws nourishment from the Word of God. His interest is also in the happiness of others who can enjoy the fruit that is produced.

Aristotle says, “**Live out your identity.**”

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<sup>1</sup> The sermon is called “Happiness” and can be found here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llQjRH4deA&list=PL4zcNK35MMx6OPo\\_9VeiQiUSwS\\_3fpHzf&index=54&t=2758s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llQjRH4deA&list=PL4zcNK35MMx6OPo_9VeiQiUSwS_3fpHzf&index=54&t=2758s)

or here: <https://www.spres.org/worship/sermons/page/5/>

<sup>2</sup> A paraphrase of Jonathan Sacks, *Morality*, 2020, p. 103.



The poet says, “Live out an identity formed by God.”

Aristotle says, “Live according to values.”

The poet says, “Live according to values that reflect God’s will.”

The poet is concerned about the fruit: the decisions made, and the actions taken. They must not be like those who “take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers.”

Who is the poet speaking of? The psalm doesn’t spell out who those are who “take the path that sinners tread.”

But no worries. The prophet Isaiah is more than happy to fill in the blanks. Spend just a little bit of time reading the first 39 chapters of Isaiah and you’ll quickly pick up that the great sins that Isaiah sees in Israel are injustice, oppression, and a lack of concern for those in need. Isaiah even describes people of means and power in Israel who are callous and uncaring over the plight of those who are unable to resist their exploitation. He even describes those who are jacked up because they have successfully plundered, oppressed, or cheated.

Isaiah 11, though, is a *passage of hope*. Sitting as it does in the midst of prophecies of judgement, the chapter is like a beautiful flower blooming in the desert. He sees a day when the arc of history that bends toward justice finally reaches that end.

To fully appreciate the passages of hope, you need to remember the context of judgement. Preceding the “arc toward justice” is this “axe of judgement.” The prophesy begins as if the warning of judgement of the previous nine chapters has already taken place. That Israel has fallen already, and the king has been removed from his throne. The tree of Israel has been felled leaving nothing but a stump. And it will have happened not as some might naively think, that a more powerful nation overran a weaker Israel, just as the powerful *in Israel* had overrun the poor and the meek. The tree was felled because of internal rot. The tree had not absorbed the Word of God but instead absorbed the ways of power and greed with the resulting fruit being market manipulation, exploitation, and social conditions that encourage poverty and want.

Assuming the axe has already done its work, the prophesy of hope begins. Out of this stump of Jesse, grows a shoot. And this shoot will become a new king  
with wisdom and understanding,  
a spirit of counsel and might,  
of knowledge and trust in God.

This new king will not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear. That is, he will not rule from a place of self-interest and gratification. This king will use his authority and power to bear good fruit in the world:

to balance the scales of power and the marketplace-  
*no*, even to tilt the scales-  
toward justice toward the poor and meek-  
toward mercy-  
toward compassion- toward peace.



This prophesy of hope is not just for Israel but for all of the world: “for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

Not all scripture is created equal. Psalm 1 and Isaiah 11 become beloved passages for the people of Israel who saw the nations of Israel and Judah fall, and who then lived for so many years in exile in the hope that God will send a messiah to bend the arc away from judgement and toward peace. Their metaphor of a tree bearing good or bad fruit was a gift that kept giving. It informed the preaching of John the Baptist when he called for Israel’s repentance saying,

“*Bear fruits worthy of repentance. ...Even now the ax is laying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*”

And the metaphor informed preaching of Jesus when he spoke of trees bearing good and bad fruit, and when he made a harsh point by cursing a fig tree for not bearing fruit.

Let’s go back to where we started: happiness.

The poet of Psalm 1, the prophet of Isaiah 11 and the Messiah who is Jesus, all want for us to be happy... in that second sense of happiness. They want for us what we often say we want for ourselves: a good quality of life.

Actually, they would say it differently. Considering the emphasis on bearing fruit, I think what they want from us is a *good quality of living*.

I say that because when we today talk about “quality of life,” we usually are talking about what we want for ourselves.

Am I healthy? Am I in a lot of pain?

Am I mentally sharp?

Do I have financial security?

Can I afford to do what I enjoy?

go see the places I want to see?

Do I have a job and do I enjoy my work?

Do I have friends? Am I loved?

Am I happy?

The poet, prophet, and Jesus—in calling for good fruit, in calling for a quality of living—would ask those kind of questions in a different way. They would ask:

If I am healthy, am I contributing to the health of others?

Am I helping to address and ease pain?

Am I seeing and responding to those who have mental or financial anxiety?

Am I helping others move from surviving to possibly thriving?

Am I serving those who serve me?

Am I building community? Am I spreading love?



Am I helping *others* to be happy?

They ask the questions in this way because happy are those who bear good fruit.

Happy are those

who are concerned about the happiness of all.

Happy are those

who are concerned about laws, markets, customs, and social practice.

Happy are those

who are concerned about communal health and food distribution.

Happy are those

who are concerned that power and privilege,

which so easily can be abused,

is leveraged instead to help build and then protect

a just society.-

The poet, prophet, and Jesus are saying to us:

Happy are those

who think not just about their well-being,

but also the well-being of the world.

