

Happy Are They – Psalm 1

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Here are some news items from the “gloom and doom” department that I read this week.

First, from the Wall Street Journal, the op-ed titled “U.S. Shrugs as World War III Approaches.”

“The recently released bipartisan [report](#) of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy details a devastating picture of political failure, strategic inadequacy and growing American weakness in a time of rapidly increasing danger. The U.S. faces the “most serious and most challenging” threats since 1945, including the real risk of “near-term major war.” The report warns: “The nation was last prepared for such a fight during the Cold War, which ended 35 years ago. It is not prepared today.” China, Russia, Iran, North Korea pose these very credible threats.

Also, the news came out this week that “The number of Ukrainians and Russians killed or wounded in [the grinding 2½-year war](#) has reached roughly one million, a staggering toll that two countries struggling with shrinking prewar populations will pay far into the future.”

And finally, the week began with news that a second assassination attempt was brought upon a former president of the U.S. and current presidential candidate.

Now, this is where I always present the disclaimer that newspapers and other media tend to only report bad news, or lead with bad news. And that there’s an equal or even greater amount of good news that doesn’t get published because those

stories don't sell. And there indeed are good things happening in our world.

Still, though, we can't ignore what is clearly distressing news that reflects the actions of bad actors in the world.

As I read Psalm 1 this week, the psalmist makes a clear delineation between the righteous and the wicked. "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread." In all that the righteous do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away."

God's grace is extensive and captures the true essence of who we are as followers of Jesus. And yet, the psalmist makes clear that there's right and wrong, good and evil in the world. And those who tread down a path of wickedness will face a perilous judgment.

Whether it's the leaders of regimes in Russia, China, North Korea, or Iran, or whether it's a guy with a long rap sheet and a rifle who lingered in the bushes outside Mar A Lago last Sunday, we all see the risks of taking the paths that sinners take. And those paths don't end well for them.

Instead of focusing on those who would go down the paths of sinners, however (and the repercussions of sinful behavior), let's instead focus on the rewards in following a more righteous path—as we all should and as we wish the makers of war and violence would.

The psalmist uses the word "happy" here for those who don't follow the ways of the wicked, those who don't take the paths of sinners, those who don't sit in the seats of scoffers.

These happy or blessed folks are like trees planted by streams of water, the psalmist says, which yield fruit. Their leaves don't wither, and in all they do, they prosper.

Ask any landscaper in the business of transplanting trees what the most important part of the tree is, and they'll tell you it's the roots. Landscapers go to great lengths to make sure the root-ball stays tightly packed and moist, and that it gets planted in the right kind of soil at the right depth. All kinds of damage can occur to the trunk, branches or leaves, but as long as the roots are intact, there's hope for recovery and growth. But if the roots are destroyed, the tree will probably die.

The psalmist sings of a tree planted by streams of water. Its roots are sunk in the best possible place. Thirstily they drink up the life-giving water, and even if a drought afflicts the land, this tree will survive and flourish.

It is a clear metaphor of the spiritual life — and ancient rabbis would always be sure their young students understood it well. The study of God's word those youngsters were about to undertake would be, for them, like sinking their roots into moist soil. The more they immersed themselves in the Scriptures, the more they would find power for living.

The psalm says they meditate upon it. The Hebrew word for "meditate" is derived from the word for "murmur." It refers to the practice of repeating a biblical text over and over to oneself, to commit it to memory — as Orthodox Jews do in their worship even today.
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It begs us to wonder what those who "take the paths that sinners tread" meditate on. For those who author war or who threaten war, where millions die as a result of their greediness, what's at the top of their minds? What are they meditating on?

It's not only dictators and others with their minds set on violence that take the paths that sinners tread. It's all of us at

times. We're all tempted to go down paths that are not the best for us. We meditate on things that are not from above, but that come from a culture focused only on selfishness, greed, and power.

The good news for world dictators, criminals, and for us is that there's always time for a U-turn. There's always the possibility of going in a new direction that leads to happiness or blessedness.

And that journey of turning around—of turning from path of sinners to one of being planted by streams of water, comes when we embrace who we truly are: children of God.

That should always be our foremost identity. But going down paths we don't want to go down often comes when we embrace other identities first. We often want to be seen by our occupations or by the neighborhoods we live in or by the cars we drive or by how much money is in our investment accounts. And when those identities are primary, it's easier to get off track.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes, "Little by little along the way, you learn to distinguish between the real and the unreal, between what lasts and what doesn't last at all, and you recognize the different aspects of the false self: your skin color, your sexual orientation, your ethnicity, your country, how much money you make, the car you drive, the clothes you wear. Brothers and sisters ... every mystic and saint, every prophet would say: that's what's going to die when you die. And if that's all you have, you've got nothing. That's the false self. ... You've never gotten down to the basic, of who you really are before that, before you made any money, before you got your law degree, before you were a doctor, before you were a priest. Who were you? Well, you were a child of God. As Paul says in Colossians, who you are,

hidden with Christ in God. That's the true self. And there's nothing you can do, nothing whatsoever, to create that self."

That's an identity we were born with. It's what we acknowledge in baptism. We are marked with God's grace—cleansed and forgiven and forever claimed as one of God's own.

That's what lasts, and that's the beacon that can move us to go down paths that produce fruit in season.

My oldest son is studying math in college. And now he's also concurrently begun a masters program in something called applied statistics. If I had to, I could probably spell statistics, which would be the closest I would ever come to being successful in that field.

Jacob is a bright kid. And I trust his studies will lead him to a fulfilling career in whatever he chooses to do with math and statistics. But my true prayer for him would be that he always maintains his identity primarily as a child of God, nurtured in his faith within this church family as a kid and now growing in that faith through his involvement in a local congregation in Tuscaloosa and challenged in his faith as a student at Alabama.

And I know it probably sounds ridiculous, but I also pray that world leaders who would bring harm on others would also have a moment where they, too, recognize their primary identities as God's children: nurtured, loved, and forgiven. And that they would turn from what appears to be a sinful path of greed, war, and destruction and take a road where they are nurtured like trees planted by streams of water, which yield fruit in its season.

We can all agree that we are at our blessed best, we are at our happiest, when we sense we're travelling down the right path. We just know it. At the same time, we can also

subconsciously realize when our bad behavior is not working out for us. We may not see it at the time, or we may not be able to help ourselves. But even in our bad choices we can sense it's not the path we should be travelling down.

The blessed life, the fruitful life, and the path it takes to get there, should be the one that is burned into our consciousness. It's rooted in our consciousness that we are children of God. It's so good. It doesn't mean we will be the wealthiest financially, it doesn't mean it will be free of sorrow, it doesn't mean it will be completely free of error. It simply means there will be a realization that the path we're travelling is in line with where God wants us to be.

Live in abundance, and bear good fruit. It's worth it.