

PSALTER

Psalm 1

(TFWS#2025)

**R: As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you.
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you.**

¹ 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;**
² but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

³ 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.

**R: As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you.
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you.**

⁴ The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
⁶ for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

**R: As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you.
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you.
You alone are my strength, my shield; to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you.**

THE GOSPEL LESSON

Mark 9:30-37

⁹³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." ³² But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Reader: The Word of the Lord.

People: *Thanks be to God.*

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Reading that this week reminded me of a story about Riverside Church. Do you know the great Riverside Church in Manhattan? When I was at Union Theological Seminary, I had the good fortune of having a dorm room that faced this great church. It was an impressive church building and I overlooked it's courtyard where children in a daycare would play in the afternoon while I was doing homework at my desk. I encourage you to worship there if you ever stay in the City overnight on a weekend. It's quite a powerful worship experience.

So this reading about “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” reminded me of the great Riverside Church because it tugged on a memory of a story I had heard about the church that was told by their first great preacher, the much esteemed Harry Emerson Fosdick.

The story goes that there were two men waiting to be seated one Sunday morning just before the sermon began. One was a very self-important gentleman who was waiting impatiently and the other was a quiet distinguished man. They were told that there was a single seat in the front but otherwise the remaining seating was in the balcony. The self-important man jumped in quickly saying, “I’ll take the seat near the front. I’m not the ‘balcony kind.’” The other man—smiling—quietly slipped upstairs to the balcony, obviously unrecognized by Mr. Pushy. The quiet man was John D. Rockefeller...who had paid to build Riverside Church. (*LPW, cycle B, 284*) If Mr. Pushy only knew, how embarrassed would he have been to make himself first and Mr. Rockefeller last! Do we compete for the best seat, the first place with each other at our own peril, our own diminishment?

This morning we heard a story about Jesus and the disciples walking the road to Capernaum. And after they get into the house, Jesus asks them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” Silence. As if they thought he hadn’t *heard* them out on the road! *Really!*

I would see the disciples today as the Mr. Pushy-Front-Row-Seat Guy. Like musical chairs, all twelve of them trying to get into the same seat before the music stops! And it’s so obvious, that they get caught by the teacher and they’re all about to get detention! The argument they were having? *Who was the greatest?* “It’s me!” “No, it’s me!” “You’re both crazy, it’s definitely me!”

Okay, we don’t know what they actually said, but one doubts it’s any more remarkable than “I’m not a “balcony kind” of a guy.”

When I read this passage this week, I wondered *how in the world* did they get to this place of wanting to be first and of competing with each

other! So, I began to look back over what had been happening in the past week for them. You know what I found? It was very telling.

Earlier in the week, Jesus had asked them, “Who do you say that I am?” (We remember this from last week, right?) And Peter came up with the answer, “You are the Messiah!” It’s a joyous moment, but then Jesus spoils it. He unsettles them by teaching the disciples that he will suffer, be rejected, die, and then rise again in three days. A Kodak moment ruined. *Very unsettling*, indeed.

Then, Jesus heals, he teaches.—which is fine. But then a few days later he goes up the mountain with a couple of them and is transfigured before their eyes and is suddenly speaking with Moses and Elijah. Whoa!

And *then* Jesus does it *again*: he mentions his death. He tells them *they can’t tell anyone* about this happening until after he has risen from the dead. Can you imagine? It’s pretty *unsettling*, don’t you think?

Jesus heals, he teaches. And here we are again, *just a few days later*, and what is he doing *again*? He is telling them again of his betrayal, his death, and his rising again. *Very, very unsettling*. Clearly, Jesus wants to make sure that they understand what is to come. Repetition is good for that. *But what it seems to have done is put the disciples in a tailspin*. It’s a recipe for disaster: Take a group of fairly competent individuals, mix in a bunch of stress and uncertainty about the future, and you get just such arguments as the one taking place on the road to Capernaum.

I am reminded of a situation I created in my former business career. John, who was a supervisor, and Linda, who was a manager, were both very effective employees but John was somewhat passive and Linda was—shall we say, “just a tad” competitive. I came to the conclusion that if I had John work for Linda, she would get him to be more assertive and maybe he could calm her down a bit. In order to ensure success, I made Linda’s reward based on getting John to that level, and John’s reward based on how well he could work with Linda.

And thus began the meltdown of two very competent, composed people. It started off okay! They were both enthusiastic and properly incentivized. But the stress of the situation began to wreak havoc and I found myself on many an afternoon playing Dr. Phil: “I’m right.” “No, I’m right!”

What happened to my two very able employees? Well: take two fairly competent individuals, mix in a bunch of stress and uncertainty about the future and you get just such arguments as the ones that took place in my corner office in Corporate America...*and* the ones that took place on the road to Capernaum.

...When crises happen in our lives we often find ourselves not “*acting ourselves*.” “You don’t seem yourself,” we say, or, “I’m just not myself.” When bad things happen to good people our balance is thrown off. When the world as we know it gets brought into question, we become *unsettled*. Like the disciples, we may behave badly. Things we would never do, words we would never say, thoughts we have never entertained come front and center *and even*...carry the day. Our awareness that God is in the *building and* in our *lives* gets lost in the chaos of heated emotions.

All this stuff about dying and this strange stuff about “rising again” tipped the disciples over the edge. In fact, the Gospel writer tells us that when Jesus made his announcement for yet a third time, the disciples still did not understand and were *now afraid* to ask him what he meant. Then when he asks them about their argument, they appear afraid again to tell him; “they were silent”.

So, let's talk about fear today. *Fear can be a powerful motivator*. Think of a time when fear caused you to self-protect rather than speak your truth. Think of a time when fear so paralyzed you that you fell silent and then failed -- not only your commitment to your faith, but even your very self.

I pray that many of you this morning cannot call up even a single moment. But I know that at least a few of us this morning -- or perhaps more than a few -- have moments when fear won.

Oh how I have rehearsed the words I “should have, could have” said in moments that mattered, but fear won and my voice failed me. And today, we encounter Jesus' disciples unable to voice their fear in the face of the ominous truth he is telling them. After all, if Jesus is right about what is going to happen to him, then what does it all mean? And what does it mean for them? And will they lose him? And...?

Thank GOD, (and I really mean that with all my heart), Jesus understands this. He reads the situation in the eyes of the disciples and in their silence and decides to help them out by *restoring their perspective*. It's what he does. And, isn't that what we need sometimes? We become frozen in our fears, stuck in them, can't see past them -- and we need someone to walk us past them so that we can see again. It's like “fear” is a stone wall that we can't see around, over, or under.

So Jesus sits *down* with them -- perhaps even on the ground. Our vision of sitting in recliners or easy chairs is too modern here. He sits down and they sit down -- which *grounds* them. And in the midst of their chaos and fear, he *brings them back to the basics*. What is the basic message he has for them today?

He picks up one of the children of the house into his arms and simplifies it down to one sentence: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Simplified, they get it. Simplified, but *not simple*.

We read what Jesus says, and we’re not particularly surprised by it; but the disciples are. We live in the 21st century where childhood is a privileged and nurtured status. In antiquity it was a non-status, meaning, children were *not valued* as we do today!

So, to say that whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes not Jesus but God is not a stretch. But to say that whoever welcomes one such child in my name—one such non-person welcomes Jesus—now that’s harder for them to swallow.

And yet *that is a very real part of the Gospel*: whoever welcomes the unwelcomed, the unseen, the invisible, the outcast welcomes Jesus. “Lord, when did we feed you and cloth you and visit you in prison and care for you when you were sick?” “Whenever you did so for the least of these, you did it for me.” And so Jesus puts a child on his lap and tells the message again. “Whoever welcomes the least, welcomes me.

And suddenly, elbowing for the first in line doesn't seem like the right thing to do. Instead, in unsettled times, we are being encouraged to remain faithful by serving others, by extending ourselves in service, rather than contracting and protecting ourselves out of fear.

The message is simplified, even though it’s not simple. And so we are compelled to go back to it again and again.

There is no way to make it through this lifetime without being thrown into chaos because of something we did not expect or do not understand. We will be betrayed. We will have unexpected losses. We will experience some losses as simply unacceptable...and they will happen anyway. We will go careening off the edge and behave in ways that are un-Christian. We will compete for who is right and who is wrong, who should be first and who should be last.

And in the middle of all of that—if we are able to pay *just a little* attention—Jesus is ready to sit us down and reminds us what the plan is. First he says, “Come back!” Then he says, “Calm down; I am with you.” And when he has your attention he says, “It’s very straightforward. Feed my sheep. Spread the word of grace to the ends of the earth. Take care of the people that the world turns its back on. Be a light to the world that all may have hope. And remember, I am with you until the end of time.”

You may still be unsettled, but I am inviting—and maybe even imploring you—to allow your faith to turn you back around in the right

direction -- one that expands in love and kindness and faithfulness and service -- rather than to veer off on a course of self protection you will regret.

Remember, Jesus knows your disruption, your betrayal, these mini-deaths that we have all of our lives. He knows it and he lived, and accepted death on the cross, and overcame death so that we could live within God's grace.

Sometimes I really believe that all Jesus really had to do...? was live and teach...and he could have accomplished the same thing. And then, dying an old man, his last prayer would still have been, "Forgive them, Father, for *I am now completely convinced* that they do not know what they do." But life has never been that simple and the radical message of love, mercy and forgiveness that Jesus was preaching—so counter to what the world promised—was bound to cost him his life.

There is no getting away from our humanity in this lifetime but with faith we cannot only survive—we can move mountains. We can not only survive our madness—we can thrive. We can hope and love and care. We can feel joy and peace. We can love someone up who is lonely and afraid. We can change the course of another person's life. We can lead someone else to God's heart. It's a radical way to live and yet in the end, it is really all that matters, isn't it?

My unsettled friends, be faithful. Be inspired by the God who created you, the Christ who redeems you, and the Holy Spirit who always wants for you wholeness, love, mercy and grace.

Blessings on the journey. AMEN.