

SONGS IN THE KEY OF LIFE

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Texts: Psalm 1 and Colossians 3:16-17

In the fall of 1976 as I was beginning my sophomore year in college Stevie Wonder released his 18th album, *Songs in the Key of Life*. The album won a Grammy for album of the year and included some enduring hits that some of you will remember fondly from your youth and others may recognize from listening to a collection of golden oldies. *Isn't She Lovely*, *Sir Duke*, *Knocks Me Off My Feet*, and *I Wish* were on that album as well as some lesser known songs like *Joy Inside My Tears* and *Village Ghetto Land*. It is a diverse collection with great music and lyrics drawn by Stevie Wonder from experiences in life and from problems challenging our life together.

That album title – *Songs in the Key of Life* – could be a fitting subtitle for the Book of Psalms. You can imagine it being found on some fragment of papyri discovered in a cave somewhere in the Sinai as Hebrew scholars huddle excitedly around this scrap of parchment and read: *The Book of Psalms: Songs in the Key of Life*. The 150 psalms in this songbook of Scripture are written in the key of life as they testify to the varied experiences of living then and now:

resounding in praise one moment and crying in lament the next,
encouraging hope and drowning in despair,
venting anger and pleading for peace,
expressing faith and a host of doubts.

The tunes to which these songs were sung are long lost, but the names of some of the melodies have survived, tune names which may sound odd to our ears but were perhaps familiar to theirs: *Dove on Far-off Terebinths*, *Lily of the Covenant*, *Deer of the Dawn*. Instructions for accompaniment with instruments can be found in the text – *with strings and flutes* – while other psalms say simply, *A Song* or *A Prayer*. Some offer the context for which the song is appropriate: *A Psalm of Thanksgiving*, *a Song for the Sabbath Day*, *A Prayer of one afflicted when faint and pleading before the Lord*, *a Song of Ascents* (on the way to Jerusalem). Many are attributed to David though it is doubtful that he wrote as many as bear his name; other writers too are

acknowledged: Solomon, the Korahites. Like our hymnal, the book of Psalms is a collection of songs by various authors from various places to be used in various settings for one great purpose identified on the purple cover of the hymnal in our pews: Glory to God!

Every 20 years or so, Presbyterians come out with a new hymnal to do as the psalmist urges us and “sing to the Lord a new song!” One of the burning questions for those who assemble a new hymnal is always, where do you start? Which hymn should be first in the hymnal? Methodists always give Charles Wesley the first slot in their hymnals with “*O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing*,” but our Presbyterian hymnals are more varied – in hymn selection and in color. The red hymnal from the 1950s began with *Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty*; the blue hymnal followed the liturgical year and opened with *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus*. Our purple hymnals now begin with *Holy, Holy, Holy!* With what hymn would you begin?

The psalmist begins with the psalm we read this morning. It is not happenstance that he chooses this psalm to open this ancient hymnbook, for it sets a direction for the psalms which follow. It demands that we make a choice between two ways of living: the way of the wicked or a righteous path. Yogi Berra once said, “If you don’t know where you’re going you might not get there.” The psalmist wants us to know where we are going and how to get there. He wants to get us off on the right foot, to lead us on a righteous path in the way of the Lord. The psalms that follow are songs in the key of life to be sung along that way, a way that begins with the first word of the first psalm: *happy* which might also be translated, *blessed!*

One of my least favorite activities is playing ice-breakers in small groups. On more Presbyterian occasions than I care to remember some well-meaning leader has suggested that in small groups we share our response to a question that goes something like this: if you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be and why? It is not that I have anything against trees; I would feel the same way if the question was, what kind of *insect* or *bacteria* would you be? I just have no burning desire to describe my life to total strangers in metaphors of trees, bees or disease. There are better uses for those metaphors.

Psalm 1 is one of those better uses for the tree metaphor. The psalmist describes those who reject the sinners' path, refuse the advice of the wicked, and walk on righteous roads. They are like trees planted by flowing streams, he says; they are fruitful, happy and blessed. The psalmist does not say what kind of tree they might be – weeping willows, sturdy oaks, or exotic teaks – he simply says they are like trees thriving beside streams of water. In the arid land in which the psalmist lived water was life; to be planted near flowing waters was to be blessed and fed with the source of life. Those who love the law are thus blessed, he says, for the law is a source of nourishment and life. The first psalm in this best-loved songbook of the Hebrew Scriptures thus begins with a metaphor and beatitude about life and love of the law:

*Happy (or blessed) 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;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord
and on his law they meditate day and night.*

The law they love is not the law of the land, but the law of the Lord, *Torah* in Hebrew. *Torah* is much more than the Ten Commandments, more than a list of holy rules; it is instruction for daily living, a path to follow that is righteous, just and consistent with God's plan for us. As one writer puts it:

To delight in Torah, to ponder Torah, is to swim in the vast ocean of God's love of and commands for God's people.ⁱ

Psalm 1 is a blessing upon all who love God's law by following God's path. Choose the path of life, urges the psalmist. Ignore the advice of the wicked, resist their temptations, and follow the righteous road – not a self-righteous road, but a righteous road. Blessed are they who make that choice! Happy are they, he says, or at least they should be!

In John Steinbeck's classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath* the Joad family arrives in California, practically penniless with all their worldly possessions loaded on a makeshift truck, only to discover that California is not the paradise they had imagined. There is no work to be found, and the natives are hostile toward all the *Okies* invading their fertile land. The Joads end up in a government camp, a virtual oasis in the desert of hostility all around them. There they find people like themselves, good people who have lost everything, and are searching only for a chance to make a new life. The one

bright spot in the misery of day-to-day living is a dance held in the camp on Saturday evening. Men, women, and children wash up and dress up to share a brief respite from the misery with music and dancing. For one evening life is restored. But as they head to the dance, there is one group who refuses to join them, holier-than-thou folks who sit and glare in stony judgment. With their eyes they condemn the Joads and every other family who would dance and make merry; with their lips they lament this sin that they, the godly, must look at. They claim to love Jesus, but they show little love for their neighbors and even less joy in living as they try to abide by a laundry list of Do's and Don'ts they believe is key to their salvation. They sit in the seat of those self-righteous scoffers of whom the psalmist warned, condemning their neighbors and basking in their holy misery.

You know those folks. They are more righteous than God, and the God they know is a demanding taskmaster who is more concerned about the letter of the law than its spirit. They follow the law except the law of love of neighbor. They are grouchy and make you wonder if they find any good in the good news. In the New Testament they are Pharisees, in early America they were Puritans, some of them now live down the street from you, and if we are not careful, we may find ourselves in their shoes. It can be a great temptation to sit in the seat of scoffers and judge others as if God's law could be reduced to a set of rules to follow, instead of being a holy, loving, forgiving way of life. Paul describes that way in these terms:

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with one another and forgive each other. Clothe yourselves with love and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17 para.)

For Paul and for the psalmist, joy and peace come in following God's path, in living in God's righteous way, in loving and serving as Jesus calls us to love and serve God and neighbor, in singing psalms in the key of life throughout our lives and life together. "Happy are they who do so" says the psalmist. "Blessed are they." May you be so happy – and so blessed! Amen

ⁱ John Holbert, *Feasting on the Word: Year B Vol. 2*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2008, p.535