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Psalm 1
Growing Roots
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Every healthy-minded person wants to be happy. The problem is that whenever we get our lives just right, it's never long before something changes. And change brings loss, which never makes us happy. Is there any happiness we cannot lose?

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The first Psalm is a Beatitude. In both the Old and New Testaments, Beatitudes depict the path to true happiness. It is never the path we would have assumed. "Happy are those," the Psalmist claims, "who delight in the law of the Lord." The word for law in the Hebrew is Torah. It doesn't just refer to the commandments of Moses, but also to divine instruction, guidance, and to the whole tradition of faith. So we could paraphrase the Psalm to say, "Happy are those who live out of our tradition, for they are like trees planted by streams of water." Not only does this allow them to be fruitful, but even more importantly, the tradition allows them to be rooted. When the winds blow, they are not ripped down.

Last month, my family's little neighborhood experienced a terrifying microburst of wind during a summer storm. Our neighbors' beautiful, towering silver maple came crashing down, missing their house by inches. This tree had to be four feet in diameter and well over forty feet tall, but its roots were so shallow. After the storm, we all circled around it and were amazed by so great a tree lying on the ground. But I was the only one thinking, "This will preach!" It doesn't matter how tall or beautiful life appears, without deep roots you'll never survive the storms. Happy are those who are rooted in a tradition.

We live in an age when popular belief claims just the opposite. Today we hear that we each are on our own to make ourselves happy, and the way you do it is to enjoy yourself, get what you want, and construct life on your own as if the past can explain nothing about you. But the Psalmist calls this belief wicked. And the wicked, he says, will not stand in the judgment of God. The wicked will not stand at all. When the wind comes, they blow away like chaff.

The winds of change have always blown, and we certainly feel them today. Those of you who grew up in Pittsburgh know this is not the same city you used to live in. The economic base has had to change, the old neighborhoods are all in transition, and globalization is making its way even to our town. One of the classes that we offered in our Adult Education program last year was on understanding Islam. Churches didn't use to offer classes like that. Now it is pretty important. Whether you realize it or not, every day you encounter people representing the great religions of the world who are right beside you. You can't even go to an ATM machine today without first having to pick a language. Some of us celebrate this multiculturalism as a wonderful discovery of new neighbors. Others worry that the changes which accompany it will mean that something is lost.

Diversity is not the only reason for change. Progress also comes at a cost. I remember going shopping with my grandmother. First we went to the bakery, then to the butcher, to the dry goods store, and to the stand of the man who sold produce from his farm. All of the proprietors of those places knew her by name. Now we all go to the supermarket, or maybe to one of the warehouse stores where nobody knows your name and where you can only buy toilet paper in bundles of fifty rolls. Something has changed.

Some things are even created to change. Our bodies were created to change through the aging process. So do families naturally change, as some members leave home, others die, and new members of the family are born. Workplaces also have to change in order to survive today. But all of these changes involve a loss. Your doctor retires, and you've been assigned a younger one now. Then you realize that your accountant, attorney, dentist, and pastors are younger than you. It's inevitable, but not easy. We can adjust to most of these dynamics eventually. But some changes seem to rip out our hearts, and how do you ever adjust to that? No one ever gets over losing a cherished spouse.

When it feels like the winds of change are about to rip apart the life you have known, it makes sense that you would flee to church where you are hoping to find sanctuary from your faith tradition. Isn't that what the first Psalm promises? Not, exactly. The promise is not that the tradition will protect you from change. The promise is that it will keep you rooted. It does that by telling you who you are.

The tradition of the church drives your life deep into thousands of years of faith, discovered through storm after storm when the winds of change blew most everything away but faith. When you stand to say the Creed, you are professing the exact words of apostles, martyrs, saints, scholars, and communities of faith who down through the ages have already survived everything you could possibly face. Their great faith is your inheritance, your root system.

None of us have enough faith on our own to withstand all of the changes of life. People often speak of "my little faith." But when a microburst of change blows through your life, "my little faith" won't do it. We all need great faith to outlast the storms. That is what tradition gives us—a great faith that now lives within us as well.

Each generation has to allow the tradition to come to life within them. We can know all of the forms of our tradition: the words of the creeds, the hymns, and even the words of the Holy Scriptures. And yet until we believe these words, they are just words.

The late church historian Jaroslav Pelikan claimed, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." Tradition is the great faith of the great communion of saints that now lives in us. But traditionalism, like most all "isms," turns in on itself and worships not the God to whom our tradition points, but worships tradition itself. Traditionalism turns the expressions of our faith into idols. Our liturgy, celebrations, practices, and our music are not the sustaining tradition but expressions of it. The tradition is great faith in God. Traditionalism is rootless. It will not hold you for long, for even our expressions of tradition themselves change.

Traditionalism is what Jesus encountered among the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes who had mistaken the forms of faith for the content of faith. It drove Jesus nuts because he knew it could not hold us to God. But happy are those who believe the tradition of great faith, for they shall be like a tree planted by streams of water.

Streams and rivers played an important role in the mind of the biblical authors. Isaiah described the sustaining grace of God as a stream that flows in the desert. Psalm 42 claims that as a deer longs for flowing streams so my soul longs for you, O God. Psalm 46 claims there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. Ezekiel had a vision of a river of life that would flow out of the temple for the people. All of these images depict the grace of God that flows down from those who have gone before us and now has come to give us a faith that we can never lose.

The Jordan River once had to be crossed by the Hebrews with steps of faith before they could enter the promised land. So it is no accident that it is there, in that same river, that Jesus began his ministry with baptism. Jesus stood in the tradition he inherited. He claimed that he came not to abolish the Torah,

the divine guidance, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). So isn't it interesting that rather than subscribing to all of the traditionalism of the religious leaders who resisted change and tried to keep things settled, Jesus just kept on the move? It's because that is our tradition. The stream tradition by which we are planted is dynamic and on the move.

It is hard to find anyone caught up in a drama with God who is not on the move. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the wandering Hebrews, David, and the exiles were often in movement. The times when they got into the most trouble were when they settled down. As we read through the Gospels, it is clear that the disciples were wondering when Jesus was going to settle down in a new place. They kept thinking he was going to build the kingdom right there. But Jesus had no organization, established no articles of incorporation, and didn't even have officers. (Well, he did try to have a treasurer, but that didn't work out very well.) Why does Jesus keep moving even to this day? Because some things are only discovered through change, and one of the most important is that it is not the blessings that hold you, but the one who does the blessing.

The point of coming to Jesus is not to find someone who will prevent change. The point of coming to Jesus is to come to Jesus. He is the one who roots us in God. He is the only one who is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. He is the living water for the insatiable thirst of our souls.

Happy are those planted in Christ, the living water. Amen.