

True Colors

Southminster Presbyterian Church

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Text: Psalm 119:1 - 8 (with special appearance by Deuteronomy 30:15 - 20)

Opening Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing unto You our Rock and our Redeemer.

Sermon

Today's passage comes from a gorgeous book of poetry. 150 poems that await your attention to explore them by learning about their form, their historical context, their use of language that is sometimes carried over in translation, but more often lost, and want to be your friends to comfort you and challenge you and sometimes simply accompany you.

As is the case with much of good poetry, it is accessible at a first read and gains depth with exploration.

Perhaps you remember what I think is a common elementary school exercise of creating an acrostic using your first name. AI helped me create one using the first name of my late maternal grandmother.

G – Gracious

L – Loving

A – Admirable

D – Dependable

Y – Youthful at Heart

S – Steadfast

It turns out that there was a indeed a time in English literature when this was a respected poetic form and was used by Chaucer, sparingly by Shakespeare, a little by Edgar Allen Poe, and many others.

That's exactly what's going on in this psalm. But this psalmist was like, "I'm gonna write the most acrostically acrostic ever written!" So in this acrostic, each of the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet has its own eight line stanza. And each of those eight lines starts with that letter.

I feel like I need to say that A.I. does not write my sermons. I say that because I did ask ChatGPT to write three stanzas of poetry with eight lines in each stanza, every line in the stanza beginning with the same letter, the first with A, the second with B, and the third with C. And to use, as the topic of the poem, Southminster Presbyterian Church in Beaverton, Oregon. Let's see what it had to say about us:

Amid the quiet neighborhoods of Beaverton,
 hope rises each Sunday morning.
A welcoming sanctuary stands as Southminster Presbyterian
Church.
Ancient prayers mingle with present joys beneath its steady roof.
Acts of kindness flow freely through open doors.
A chorus of faith echoes in scripture and song.
Arms of friendship gather neighbors and strangers alike.
Anchored in grace, the congregation weathers every season.
Abiding love shapes every heart that enters.

Beneath soft Northwest skies, followers find belonging.
Believers are followers of Christ, bringing questions and praise
alike.
Bonds of fellowship grow strong in conversation and care.
Bread is broken and blessings are shared at welcoming tables.

Bright faith blooms even on Oregon's rainiest days.
Bound together by covenant, members serve their wider
community.
Blessings take shape in prayer, service, and crocheted gifts of
comfort.
Beyond the walls, compassion walks the streets of Beaverton.

Centered in Christ, the church stands steady and sure.
Caring hands crochet with patience, crafting comfort stitch by
stitch.
Choirs lift courageous harmonies that carry heavenward.
Children learn stories of grace that will guide their lives.
Compassion kindles outreach to neighbors near and far.
Candles cast calm light during prayerful evenings.
Covenant promises call each generation to faithful service.
Christ's enduring love crowns Southminster with purpose and
peace.

Not bad, right?

This psalmist does this for 22 letters. It was used by this
psalmist both because it was a recognized form of poetry at
the time, and also as an aid in memorization. 8 lines times 22
. . . that 176 lines. And ALL of it, is about the role of the law in
the lives of the people.

There are many different words used to refer to the law in
these 176 verses including law, testimonies, ways, precepts,
statutes, commandments, and more. One scholar suggested

that perhaps a better translation for “law” would be “instruction”.

This psalm might, at first reading, seem very black and white. Happy are those who keep God’s decrees. It reminds me of the first day of school in fifth grade. I was at a Christian elementary school where I had a great experience. But that first day, we gathered for chapel and the new principal gave the message to set the tone for his principal-ship and for the year. I remember very little of chapel through those years, but that day, his clear and repeated theme was “The eye in the sky never blinks!” I always followed the rules, but I was pretty sure the principal had already heard about my classmate, Ralph Jenkins, and was trying to instill the fear of God in him. I’m pretty sure it didn’t work and anyway, we all outlasted that principal!

“You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.” says the Psalmist. But is God really that black and white? Is God really doling out happiness based on how few times we hit the guardrails like Olympian luge athletes trying to stay away from hitting the walls of ice that threaten to slow their time and steal the joy that making the podium grants?

Another lectionary passage for the day is from Deuteronomy 30 and says, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” The passage sets before the people—and before us—a choice. We can make choices that

lead to a fullness of life or we can make choices that limit our joy.

Scripture is pretty clear that there are consequences for choices, but I'd say it's less, "Do this or else!" and more "The choice is yours, but I really want you to make good choices that will be life-giving." Across the writings attributed to Moses and reflected in this secondary passage in Deuteronomy, Moses says that choosing life and prosperity means loving God with your whole heart, it means canceling the debts of the poor, limiting punishment to protect human dignity, offering hospitality to runaway slaves, paying employees fairly, and leaving part of the harvest for those who need it. Choosing life means choosing it for everyone.

Moses knew that when people followed these instructions, they had lives that were marked by passion and joy. And so he says to them, I've laid out the choice for you. Choose life! Choose good! Individually, absolutely, but also as a nation. When a nation chooses life, it is life for everyone. It lifts the entire system.

Think about the choices being made by our President and then listen to this quote from the President-elect of Portugal, António José Seguro:

"We will not allow security to be confused with xenophobia, nor order with exclusion. Portugal is, by definition and by history, a nation of emigrants; we are a people who know

what it means to cross borders in search of a better life. For that reason, I will not accept that those who come to work with us, to help build our country and sustain our economy, are treated as second-class citizens. Human dignity is not negotiable.” Imagine what a different impact that system will have on the entire nation of Portugal.

This Psalm lays out in 176 verses the value and deep importance of God’s law. The psalmist sets them out with young people in mind—for these psalms would be memorized by the young and then carried in their hearts and minds for the rest of their lives.

I was once with one of my cousins when she was nannying for two young girls. The toddler was throwing a fit—she didn’t yet have words to express herself. My cousin figured out she wanted her sweater off. Helping her take it off, she looked over at me and said compassionately, “It’s hard to be little.”

I often think back to that and expand her reflection to so many truths. It’s hard to be little. It’s hard to be a teenager. It’s hard to be a young adult. It’s hard to adult. It’s hard to age. It’s hard to be old. In short, it’s hard to be human!

This psalm is trying to make our human experience a bit smoother and simpler. But we have to choose it.

Every ice skater had their first time on the ice. Had an adult helping them as they donned their first pair of skates. I imagine a little one starting to put their first skate on the wrong foot. The parent gently says, “You can put it on that foot if you want to, but I think it’ll feel a lot better if you put it on the other foot!” The child might still have a choice, but we all know they’re going to enjoy the experience on the ice more if they’re on the right feet. And those kinds of choices continue from that first donning of skates through years of feedback from teachers and coaches.

This message is a bit like. Choose life! Choose joy! Let’s make choices that allow not just us, but everyone around us to choose joy. To use our citizenship, our voice, our vote, our resources to make choices to bring freedom and cancel fear for others. By living into our own true colors, let’s live in ways that light and life even to those who currently feel they need to try to be invisible. We need their color to shine also.

Amen.