

# THE STREAM OF LIFE

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The Old Testament lesson comes from the prophet *Jeremiah*, chapter 17, verses 5 through 10. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Jeremiah 17, beginning at verse 5, we read in Jesus' name.

- 5 Thus says the LORD:  
“Cursed is the man who trusts in man  
and makes flesh his strength,  
whose heart turns away from the LORD.
- 6 He is like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see any good come.  
He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land.
- 7 “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,  
whose trust is the LORD.
- 8 He is like a tree planted by water,  
that sends out its roots by the stream,  
and does not fear when heat comes,  
for its leaves remain green,  
and is not anxious in the year of drought,  
for it does not cease to bear fruit.”
- 9 The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately sick;  
who can understand it?
- 10 “I the LORD search the heart  
and test the mind,  
to give every man according to his ways,  
according to the fruit of his deeds.”

*Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

You may be seated.

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The sermon today is based on this Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah, and also a lot on Psalm 1, which we read at the very beginning of the service. If you look back at Psalm 1 to compare it with Jeremiah 17, you will see that the two passages are pretty much the same thing.

We don't know who wrote Psalm 1, but it was almost certainly written long before Jeremiah's ministry. The Psalms are divided into five books. The first book, which is comprised of the first forty-one psalms, is associated with the reign of King David. Most of those psalms were written by David, with a few others thrown in. So Psalm 1 was probably written sometime

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around 1000 BC, while David was king. Jeremiah prophesied about four hundred years later, roughly around 600 BC, with his ministry extending twenty or thirty years on either side. And Psalm 1 is “number one” for a reason. It’s really good. It’s also really important. So it would have been very familiar to the ancient Hebrews. And so it’s pretty obvious that Jeremiah was thinking about Psalm 1 when he wrote about this tree planted by a stream in chapter 17.

Both passages speak about a tree that is planted in the perfect spot. It’s right along a stream, so that its roots can always reach water. I want you to imagine this in your minds. It’s maybe a little bit like a tree down by the Red River, but better. Instead of a large river with steep banks that sometimes swells into a raging monster, the picture is a consistent stream with clean, flowing water. I picture a stream winding through a little valley in the hill country surrounding Jerusalem. That’s different than a tree along the Red River. There you might have a tree at the top of the bank, where its roots need to reach down twenty feet or more to reach the water. Or maybe it’s a young sapling that sprouts in the lower part of the bank. For its first year, it can easily reach the water, so it starts to think that life as a tree is pretty good, but when the flood comes in the spring, it gets washed away. The stream we read about in Psalm 1 and Jeremiah 17 is different. It’s the perfect place for a tree. It has consistent, clean, and gently flowing water. When the sun beats down with its scorching heat, the tree does not wither, because it can reach water. When a drought comes, and everything else dies, it does not wither, because it can still reach water. Whatever the circumstances of the environment may be, the tree thrives, because it does not live and die by what’s happening in the air around it. It lives and continues to live by the stream of water. Such is the one who trusts in the LORD. The water gives life because Jesus died and rose again. He has been through death to atone for our sins and give us life through his resurrection.

The psalm uses the tree to illustrate the man who delights in the Law of the LORD and meditates on it day and night (1:2). Jeremiah does the same thing, but he describes that man as the one who “trusts in the LORD” (17:7). And, of course, both the Psalm and Jeremiah are describing the same man. The one who delights in the Law of the LORD and meditates on it day and night will also trust in the LORD. And the one who trusts in the LORD will also delight in his Law and meditate on it day and night. They’re describing the same man. And that man will be blessed.

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I want to unpack this a little bit, starting with the psalm. It starts with the negative, that is, what we should not do:

“Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers” (1:1).

Notice how it describes a progression from walking, to standing, to sitting. With each step, the fool becomes more entrenched in the counsel of the wicked. This is what happens when we listen to the ungodly advice of the world. First, the fool walks among the wicked. He’s not necessarily staying there, but he walks in and out among them, allowing himself to be tempted. Then he stops and stands. He listens more. Finally, it becomes his permanent place, and he sits down. That is where he will remain. He has become one of the scoffers. Blessed is the man who does not do any of that.

Instead,

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“His delight is in the Law of the LORD,  
and on his Law he meditates day and night.”

We should define what the Law is in this context. The Hebrew word here, perhaps you have heard it before, is “Torah” (תּוֹרָה). It does not mean “Law” only in the sense of, “Thou shalt do this and thou shalt not do that.” It’s more than just the commandments. It includes the commandments, but it really means all the instruction of the LORD, Yahweh. So the word “Torah” is often used to refer to the first five books of the Old Testament, the ones written by Moses. Sometimes it refers to all of the Old Testament. It might be the closest Hebrew equivalent to our word “Scripture.” So it does not simply mean the commandments of God, but it includes everything our LORD has spoken, both Law and Gospel. Blessed is the man who delights in the Scriptures.

He meditates on them day and night. God’s Word should be running through our minds day and night. We all have Bibles in our homes. If you don’t, let me know; I’ll give you one. But in the ancient world, especially in 1000 BC, around the time this psalm was written, almost no one had a Bible or any kind of book in their homes. Books or scrolls were very expensive to produce, and many people did not know how to read. So how would a typical Hebrew be able to meditate on God’s Word day and night? They memorized it. On the Sabbath, and perhaps other times throughout the week, they would go and listen to the Scriptures being read. And when you don’t have any books, and you probably can’t read, your brain is trained to remember what you hear, because it knows you can’t go back and look it up. So they were a lot better at memorizing than we are. And they didn’t have all these other sources of information and entertainment flooding their minds like we do today. When they saw their neighbor at the well in the morning, they didn’t talk about what they’re watching on Netflix. So Psalm 1 teaches them to meditate on God’s Word day and night. Perhaps it was the passage they heard on the Sabbath, or maybe they heard it read earlier that day. But it is supposed to fill their minds until the next Scripture they hear.

It’s similar to what Moses said in Deuteronomy 6:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deut. 6:4-7).

The Word of God is supposed to fill our minds day and night. Is that the way it is for us? I know that for some of you, it actually is. There are people who will come and say to me, “I’ve been reading in Isaiah, or maybe Revelation, and I want to talk with you about it.” And I can see that the Scriptures occupy their minds, even after they close their Bibles and go do something else. It’s so encouraging for me to see, and I can see that they are blessed by it. That’s being planted by the stream. The Word of God is a stream of living water to our souls.

Psalm 1 contrasts the tree to chaff. Chaff is just useless, dead plant material that blows away. It’s the thin material that covers the seeds in a head of grain. When it’s harvested, it blows away and turns to nothing. Jeremiah contrasts the tree to a shrub in the desert. That shrub does not have the same consistent water source that the tree has. Instead of depending on a stream, a shrub in the desert depends on the air around it. If the sky does not send rain, the roots of the shrub will find no water. It’s dependent on the air around it. It’s dependent on the circumstances.

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We are surrounded by many different voices. Whom will we listen to? What will fill our minds? What will we meditate on day and night? Will we meditate on the Scriptures, this consistent stream of living waters for our souls? Or will we listen to the air around us. And by that I mean spirit of the times or the ungodly voices in our culture.

I've been thinking about this and trying to categorize the different types of media that are really toxic for our souls. The form of media could be anything: video, audio, print, social media, etc. But I especially want to evaluate the content. And I've identified, I think, three basic genres that are especially toxic to our souls. If you can think of others, let me know. The first is the one that is most obviously bad. If you're old enough to know what I mean, it's the fake and cheap imitation of God's good gift of marriage. I won't say much about it today, but perhaps we should talk about it in some depth sometime, I just need to figure out how to say more with the appropriate level of modesty. There are people, even Christians, who become so engrossed in these videos that it fills their minds. They're thinking about it almost all the time. And it changes the way they view themselves and all the people around them. It becomes the thing they meditate on day and night. If that's you, I'd like to help you.

The second genre is fiction. It could be novels, movies, TV shows, or music. Story has a great power to change the way we think, either for good or evil. And there is a sort of unwritten code of stories today. Many of them abide by this code that every person needs to do whatever they feel is right for them, and they can take any ungodly activity or relationship and write a fictional story where it works out great for everyone. And we are predisposed to believe these stories, even subconsciously, because we see it with our eyes. Not every story is like this. There are still good and virtuous stories being written. But we should ask ourselves, *Does this story correspond to reality? Does it promote virtue? Or does it promote love of self?* I thought of a bunch of examples, but I'll limit myself to just one example. Consider the common script of Disney princess movies, like *The Little Mermaid*. You have a young girl who wants something, but her father warns her against it. She pursues it anyway, she finds a so-called love that fills her heart, and she lives happily ever after. And we all feel happy for her. But what does this teach young girls who want to be princesses? That their fathers might be well-intentioned, but they really don't understand things, so they should follow their feelings instead. It also teaches them that love should just be easy and blissful all the time. But anyone who's ever been married for more than a week knows that true love has much more to do with sacrifice and service than it does feeling good.

The third genre that can be toxic for our souls, and this is the one where I know someone is going to disagree with me, at least at first, but I would ask you to just examine your heart, is political news and commentary. And it's both sides: Fox News, CNN, and whatever their print or social media equivalents are. They're selling fear and hate. That's how they get us to keep consuming their products. They make half our country fear or hate the other half. It's okay to read the news, and there are good sources out there, but they're hard to find. And we don't really need to know everything that happens in the world. There comes a time when it is much better to focus on the people around us, the ones we don't need a screen to see. If it creates fear or hate in your hearts, it's time to quit.

So at the end of the day, I want you to think about this: when you close your eyes and your head hits the pillow, what's left in your mind? What are you meditating on day and night? Is it a video? A fictional story? Politics? Something else? Or is it the Word of God? "Blessed is the man ... [whose] delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on his Law he meditates day and night."

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Are your roots reaching the stream of life, or do you depend on the air around us, which is so often filled with toxins?

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It's really a First Commandment issue. God commands us to have no other gods, because other gods are not able to save us. In the end, they will never satisfy us, but will fail us and leave us in death. To have a god, practically speaking, is whatever we fear, love, or trust in above all things. Jeremiah says, "Cursed is the man who trusts in man" (17:5), but, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD" (17:7). Do not trust in man, they will fail you. And when I say that, I also mean yourselves. Do not trust in yourself, because you will fail you. Jeremiah tells us why:

"The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately sick" (17:9).

Whatever man you want to trust in, and it could be anyone, including yourself, that person's heart is deceitful and sick. We are convinced otherwise, and we convince ourselves otherwise, because the heart is deceitful. It lies to us. And we listen to its lies. It draws us away from the one true God to trust in something else. It pulls us away from the stream of life, so that we would be a shrub in the desert instead. Then we live and die by the air around us. In Jeremiah, that air around us can be our circumstances or the work of men, which always comes to nothing in the end. The shrub depends on the air around it, whatever falls from the sky. When it rains, it's okay. And when things go well for us in this life, we feel like we're okay. And our deceitful hearts learn to trust in man. But when the drought comes, when our circumstances change, when men fail us, when we get sick, when we sin, or when someone sins against us, we suffer the consequences of those sins. We die. We return to the dust. This world fails us. The people of this world cannot save us. We fail ourselves. We do this thing when the world begins to fail us, that we trust it even harder. Something helped us before, so we try to force it again. Instead, that failure of the world should turn us to trust in the LORD.

"Cursed is the man who trusts in man." Why is that? Is it because God just gets so jealous that he says, "Fine, if they won't trust me, I will smite them!" No, not at all. That is not God's nature. We curse ourselves when we trust a replacement god that cannot save us. God's good and gracious will is to save us from this, all of us. That's why he tells us to trust in him. He knows that he can save us. He knows that he is the stream of life that we can drink from and live forever.

This seems so foreign to us, because we are not this way, but the character of God is to love those who hate him. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, died for us while we were weak, ungodly, sinners, and enemies of him (Rom. 5:6-10). He is, above all, a trustworthy Savior. So trust in him. And draw your water from his stream of life. And you will live. The things of this world will fail you, and you will die. But you will also rise and live in the Kingdom of the LORD forever. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.