

**Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church**  
**Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena**

**September 20, 2009**  
**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Psalm 1

<sup>1</sup>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;  
<sup>2</sup>but their delight is in the law of the LORD,  
    and on his law they meditate day and night.  
<sup>3</sup>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.

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

Mark 9:30-37

<sup>30</sup>They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>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." <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

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

## **“Opt – In”**

**“Happy are those...whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water.”**

**...like trees planted. Oh, it is such a beautiful image. Yes, to be as a tree planted by the stream of water with roots that are deep, and branches that are tall, and leaves that shade and spread a canopy.**

**Such is the image that the psalmist uses to describe the one who delights in the law of God. But the one who takes their place with the scoffers, those who follow wicked advice, and those who take the path of sin—those ones are like the chaff that the wind blows away. It is here and gone. It does not endure.**

**I cannot help but think about the ragweed. When I go the YMCA in Abingdon, I am there on the treadmill and in front of me is an entire wall of windows that looks out on the landscape across the road. It is positioned such that one looks up and there are these tall trees in the background. In the foreground and all along the road is this ragweed that is fully in bloom right now.**

**The entire area is a just a sea of that golden rod color. The other day the wind was blowing and my vehicle just became covered in that yellowish pollen goo. That is what I think of when I think of the chaff.**

**In the vision of the psalmist either one is like that pollen goo or one is like that strong, tall tree planted by the stream of water. One is secured with depth and endures, while the other is here and then gone and almost invisible without substance.**

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I have encountered several situations as of late where the question comes down to the matter of “are you in or are you out.” It is about decision. It is about commitment. It is about knowing where you stand and then taking that stand. It is about continuing to go the way that one has decided.

“Are you in or are you out?” Our director of Children’s Ministries (our day care, pre-school, and before and after school programs) packed up, moved, and left the other day before ever even hinting that she was considering leaving. She informed me of her departure with a cell phone message. I got that message at 9PM. The next morning I found myself asking other staff members that same question: “Are you in or are you out?” Unilaterally they were in.

Indeed they were in. And I also had to ask myself that question too. “Are you in or are you out?” I knew that this would mean longer days for me, and a few years ago I told myself you will never serve as both pastor and director again. Oh, never say never.

I’ve opted in. I’ve always opted in for all that needs to be done. That does, however not mean that there are not times that I want to opt out. At a few points along the way I cannot help but think of that friend of mine who always used to say, “The airport is not that far away and we have credit cards. We can just buy clothes when we get there, and I don’t care where there is.”

Opt in or opt out? The airport would be an opt out.

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Like a tree planted or like the chaff that the wind carries away. The psalmist does not paint a picture of anything else. One is either like that firmly planted tree with those deep roots or one is like that here today and gone in a minute pollen goo of the ragweed. One or the other.

**There is no shade of gray here. It is either the one or it is the other. Either you delight in the law of the Lord or you find your place with the scoffers. There is no fence to startle, and there is branch of a tree with some pollen goo—no, no it is either tree or chaff. In or out. One or the other other.**

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**In the Gospel of Mark the disciples are the ones who have opted in. They are the insiders in the life of Jesus and the followers of his teachings and life. Yet, so often those insiders are seen as the ones who just don't get it. They are on the inside, but left on the outside.**

**Jesus is traveling with them; they are headed towards Jerusalem. The journey towards the passion narrative has already begun here. They are taking those initial steps. It is along that way that Jesus says 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." To that Mark tells us that the disciples did not understand and that they did not ask him any questions.**

**They are silent. It is the first of two places in these seven verses of Chapter 9 where the disciples are left silent. The second has to do with what comes next. As they arrive at Capernaum, Jesus asks them what they have been arguing about on the way. Mark then lends us the insight that along the way they were arguing among themselves as to who among them was the greatest. Which among them had the most authority? Which among them was highest on the hierarchy? Who had the most power? Who was closest to Jesus?**

**That word "argue" we need to attend to. When we hear that word we think of hostile words, raised voices, and people who are in, if not in a literal then in a figurative, fight. That is not the meaning of the word that**

is translated argue here. It really means to negotiate, to debate, to use reason and work at arriving at a conclusion.

The second time the disciples are silent is when Jesus asks them what they had been arguing about along the way. No one shares. Jesus then takes a child. It probably is not just a kid hanging out, but children were used as ones who served food at the table. So what Jesus probably does here is take the serving child and put her in middle of them and he says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

He re-frames the issue for them. They want to figure out who is the most powerful and who has the most ability. They want to compare résumés. Jesus turns that all around. It is not about perfect qualifications or how we logically think it should be. It is about that relationship. It is about that serving the one who otherwise is not even noticed. That is where the kingdom of God is.

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Such is often not clear to us. Such is often lost on our radar screen. We get so accustomed to thinking we know where we are at and how things work that we miss the beauty of the silence.

In the flow of these seven verses it is the silence that is the beautiful gift of Jesus. He allows that silence as the necessary space that is needed in order call the disciples back to where they should be. It is as if they have opted out and Jesus in his grace gives them the chance and the space to opt back in.

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The wonder of this relationship with God is that we do have our moments when we are really in. We do have those times when truly we

are those trees planted firm and deep with insights and commitment that soars high into the sky. But there are also those times when we are more like the pollen goo floating through the air—here again gone again too.

In the silence, the Holy Spirit in the real presence of the Christ is calling us back. In the silence we are being invited to again be planted deep and see our lives as rooted and growing in the strong good earth of God.

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It is the very nature of God—this is who God is always loving us so much that again and again and again we are give the invitation to opt in and opt back in and opt back in again. Such is the cross and the empty tomb. We see that love of God so strong and so for us that “he empties himself and becomes a servant even to the point of death...and God raises him again.”

It is that eternal “yes” and that eternal invitation to opt-in again that is so much who God is.

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In our silence—when we become still. And it might be that we are silent because we have nothing left. It might be that we are worn out and we just give in or give out. It might be that we finally get silent because the noise of our living does not satisfy anymore....whatever it might be, it is that moment...those moments that we get silent when we hear that wonderful Jesus calling us back.

It is in that silence that we see Jesus calling us back to what really matter—that welcoming...that invitation to be planted. Trees not chaff. In the silence were to come back. In the silence we are to hear the invitation: OPT – IN! Amen.