

# Sermon Text for March 6, 2022

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## ***Psalm 1, Mark 15:6-15*** ***“The choices we make”***

On Friday I went to Swarthmore to see their basketball team play in the first round of the NCAA playoffs for division III. It was great to be back after three years, saw a bunch of friends, then took my daughter out for dinner and ice cream. I noticed that people were especially friendly and I chalked it up to folks not being together and out and about for two years. That was until I went to use the restroom at the ice cream place and noticed that for the entire evening my fly was down. I don't normally share this in my sermons, but when you spend 4 hours with people that you know and not one of them says anything it leaves a bit of a mark on you. No wonder people were so friendly.

That was obviously not a conscious decision on my part, but in our lives, and especially now we can see it on the world stage, we make decisions that have a tremendous impact on the lives of individuals, on nations, and even on the world in general. Both of our Scriptures today describes choices that we make and how they can have an impact that is significant to us. Not a single one of us makes a decision in a vacuum, what we decide doesn't just impact us as individual, but it also affects those around us, sometimes in more significant ways than it does to us individually. But this has to be set against the backdrop of the choices that ultimately God has made for us and made on our behalf, and we can see that it is always decisions that result in grace upon grace.

### **READ**

As we read Psalm 1 it should have become clear that what we see depicted is a classic Scripture that describes what happens when you make good decisions and what happens when you make bad decisions. Psalm 1 is one of a variety of Scriptures that we find that point to the importance of making good decisions. Another is Joshua 24:15: “Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Or in our readings for this week in Deuteronomy 30:19-20 we read: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

In each of these Scripture we have this Old Covenant understanding that when you make the right decision, when you do choose life, or choose the Lord, when you make a good choice, then good things will follow. You will receive your fruit in its season and all that you do will prosper. But, as Billy Joel said, we know better, only the good die young. We know that there is

no guarantee for the decisions that we make, whether good or bad, and the result eventually turning into something that is to our favor. Matthew states it best in 5:45: Someone read that for me: For God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

I think for Psalm 1 the better image that we should use, instead of this false notion that if you do good good will come to you, is the image of the tree. Look at vs. 3, each decision either adds to your root base and increases the stability of your root system, or chips away at it. Each decision that you make either brings you closer to God or takes you further away from Him. You know when you make a decision which one it is, you know if it will take you closer to God or further away.

I think I have mentioned to you that every Friday morning I gather with four other men at my house and we are going over different spiritual practices and this week we began, providentially, with discernment. How do we discern the direction in which God is leading us. And we have a responsibility this week of choosing a decision and trying to discern what is God's desire for this. This is where we have to start with our decision making. Not, what is our desire, what is our wish, what benefits will we receive, which I would guess is where most of us start. Don't we normally do a cost benefit analysis of how will this decision benefit me?

That is not what God asks us to do, and this is going to be hard because it is going to break the mold of what we have done, for many of us, our whole lives. We have to move how is this decision going to benefit me and my family or me and my finances, or whatever else it might be, and transition to how will this benefit God and God's work and then trust that this decision will also have an impact that is God's desire for you and your life. Which may or may not be what you want. Decisions are never made in a vacuum, they have rippling impacts that we don't even realize, which is why they need to be made for the sake of God and not for our sake.

We have seen recently how decisions have a worldwide impact. Pilate's decisions had a historical impact that he never would have guessed. It is clear from this Scripture and from other Scriptures that he believes Jesus is innocent, he does not see Jesus as a guilty party, and he says as much to the leaders and to the people. What evil has he done? But he is getting pressure from the religious leaders who are described in vs.10 as jealous because Jesus is more popular than they are. They know that they have lost the people to Jesus, that overwhelmingly the people love Jesus, and they don't like to lose, so they look for a way in which to take Jesus out.

Pilate is being pressured by the crowds as well, the same crowds who just earlier had proclaimed Jesus as Messiah as he rode into Jerusalem, but they were riled up by the chief priests

and their lies saying that Jesus was actually not a legitimate king or and they were successful in getting the people to believe a lie. But even as he feels all of this pressure, at the end of the day, the decision is still his.

He looks for a way out, this Scripture begins with vs.6 telling us that every year Pilate has a presidential pardon that has become a tradition now and the people look forward to it. So he puts forward a revolutionary, Barabbas, who had tried to overthrow the Roman government and was captured. There were a lot of people in that day who saw the Roman government as illegitimate and wanted to install a Jewish power base and state in Jerusalem. Barabbas, whose name literally means, son of the father, is put up against another revolutionary, but one who saw his kingdom coming through peaceful means, and who was truly the Son of the Father.

So Pilate has to gauge his decision based upon not what is the right thing, he knew Jesus was innocent, but what will benefit him the most. When we gauge our decisions on their eventual utility for us alone or for our families, we will surely decide against the will of God. But Pilate decides. We read in vs.15 that his decision was based upon wanting to satisfy the crowd, so he releases Barabbas, and the crowd goes wild. He has Jesus beaten, and the crowd goes wild. He hands Jesus over to be crucified, and the crowd absolutely loses it.

People, approval of the crowds surrounding you, and the size of the crowds cheering, is not a sign of a strong leader or the sign of a right decision. Pilate reveals a paradigm of human actions and reactions under pressure, and it is not one which we ought to follow. But it is one with which we can identify ourselves at that moment.

We have made decisions over these past few years, and I mean all of us individually, as well as us collectively as a church, in some cases because either the people wanted us to do it, or because we felt other pressures and influences that before these two years we never would have listened to. We have used covid as the excuse and said that it was a covid decision, not my fault. We do the same thing when we feel like our spouse is unresponsive to our needs so we blame her or him for the infidelity. We feel like we aren't being paid enough or respected enough so we cheat our work or don't put in the time, because they don't deserve it anyway.

None of these reasons point to God as the reason for why we are making our decisions, but rather to a selfish narcissism of which we are all guilty. There is a solution and a better way to make decisions. Jesus, this king of the Jews exercises authority over us because of his fidelity to the will of God. He wasn't just a good man who makes good decisions, Jesus before Pilate is the representative in our midst of the authority of God. This text speaks not only of the kingliness of Jesus, but of the lowliness of God, a lowliness that he chose, for our sake.

In Jesus God chooses to identify with the unjustly accused and the wretched of the earth. Jesus chooses to exercise power through weakness and authority through love, showing us the better way and how we ought to make decisions. Amen.