

2-23-25 Sermon: “When the Wicked are Winning” – Psalm 37

What do we do when the wicked are winning?

This is the question that Psalm 37 asks and seeks to answer. We don’t know much about when this psalm was written or who wrote it, but it doesn’t matter because this is a perennial human question. What do we do when the wicked are winning?

This is a question that I ask myself often these days. Maybe you’re asking it too. If we believe that a loving God rules the world and created humankind in God’s image, how can the world be as it is right now? How can we humans, who bear that divine image, be so callously bent on hating and destroying one another?

Psalm 37 comes out of a tradition in the Bible called wisdom literature. We encounter wisdom literature in some of the psalms, in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Book of Job. And we’re about to hear a lot more from these wisdom thinkers; we’re going to take a journey through some of these wisdom Scriptures during the season of Lent.

Wisdom literature asks the hard questions: the problem of evil, why bad things happen to good people, etc. But what I especially appreciate about it is that it is also very practical, very concerned with how we live now.

I appreciate that about this morning’s psalm. The psalmist offers us a long-term answer, a cause for hope: Wait for the Lord, trust in the Lord; God holds the future – yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more. And while there is great comfort in our faith’s reassurance that good will ultimately triumph over evil, I need to know how to live through *right now*. What do we do this Tuesday, next Thursday when the wicked are winning?

For those of us begging for practical advice, the psalmist offers two answers. (1) Do not become like the wicked; and (2) Do what is good.

Do not become like the wicked.

Over and over the psalmist reminds us: “Do not fret because of the wicked,” “Do not be envious of wrongdoers;” “Refrain from anger and forsake wrath;” “Do not fret – it only leads to evil.”

It seems that the psalmist very is concerned that we understand the risk of concerning ourselves too deeply with the success of the wicked. That if we let our minds focus too long on the workings of evil, our hearts will harden, and we may become wicked ourselves.

A couple months ago I was talking with a friend I hadn’t seen for a while. She’s 73, part of my extended neighborhood community – the “elder lesbians of Taos,” I call them. We were at our annual New Year’s Day potluck. And I was happy to see her and catch up because I often enjoy hearing her perspective on things. She’s been around a bit longer than I have, seen more of the world, lived through a time in LGBTQ+ history that I, blessedly, did *not* have to live through.

We were talking, and we got to pontificating on the state of the world, as you do. We talked about how we thought we got here, what we’re called to do now, etc. And then my friend said something that stopped me in my tracks.

She said, “You know, I think one of the big problems is those trans people and their pronouns. They’re asking for too much. A lot of people don’t understand trans people and don’t like them, and they need to learn to accept that.”

I was shocked by her words. It certainly was not what I was expecting. And I got angry, I’ll be honest; I don’t respond well when people make unkind remarks about my family. But as I got some distance from that interaction, I realized what I felt more than anything was really, really *sad*.

Because I found myself thinking, “Wait a minute...aren’t you a lesbian? Don’t you remember when *you – we* – were the bad guy? Don’t you remember when people thought *we* were asking too much, to be able to get married and have kids and just live a happy life? And if that was true for you and me, why would it be any different for someone else? I don’t have to *understand* my neighbor to love them.

Something was happening in my friend that, if we’re honest, happens to most of us at one point or another. Whether we’re looking at the grand scope of human history or just the personalities in our family or neighborhood, whenever we someone lashing out or hurting other people, we don’t have to look too far back in their history to see a time when someone hurt them. Hurt people...hurt people.

And so the psalmist cautions, “Refrain from anger. Forsake wrath. Do not envy the wicked.” Pour out your hurt to God; do not take it up as a weapon to wield toward others. In your distress, when the wicked are winning, take care that you do not become like the wicked themselves.

The second piece of practical advice the psalmist offers us is to do what is good and right. “Commit your way to the Lord,” the psalmist writes. Trust in God and stay the course. Keep doing the good that you are doing, because doing good may be the *only* effective way to resist the power of evil.

Jesus says something similar in this morning’s Gospel reading: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer your left, also.”

Whew. I don’t know about all that, Jesus. Is this what it takes to do what is good? Perhaps you’re asking a bit too much of your followers.

Or perhaps not. The work of biblical scholar Walter Wink has transformed the way we understand this passage about turning the other cheek by offering some cultural context. Because in the first-century society in which Jesus lived and taught, it was customary for a master to reprimand a slave by giving them a back-handed slap on the face, which land on their right cheek.

So in turning the other cheek, yes, we are refusing to hit back, but we also looking the one who hit us in the eyes and saying, “If you’re going to hit me, hit me like an equal. See me as the living, breathing, human being that I am.”

In the waters of baptism, we vow to turn from sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. And that means that when evil rears its ugly head in our world, we are called to resist. But we cannot resist evil with evil, violence with violence, hate with hate. We cannot become like the wicked, cannot take the ways we’ve been hurt and hurt those around us. The only way to overcome that which is wicked, that which is evil, is to look it in the eyes with the power of love and good.

You know, it’s interesting...in the canon of Biblical wisdom literature, the thing about the wicked that makes them “wicked” is that they live for themselves alone. Time and time again, Scripture condemns the wicked because they do not heed the teachings of God, and because they pay no mind to the well-being of their neighbors.

Maybe the best way we can resist and renounce evil is to live, wholeheartedly, for one another. Amen.