



We are in our second week of our series, *Rise: Meeting God with the Psalms of Ascent*. We are using these Psalms as a pathway to connect with God for the renewal that we need at this point in the history of the worlds, unprecedented in our lifetimes. Last week we learned that the Psalms of Ascent are 15 short psalms (Psalms 120-134) that the Israelites would sing/say on their way to festivals in Jerusalem. The Israelites were on a physical pilgrimage to encounter God. We are on a spiritual pilgrimage. This is something that we desperately need after seven and a half months of living in the world of pandemic and all of the other things that have mushroomed as a result of the emotional distress in trying to preserve physical health, both of our friends, family, and neighbors as well as ourselves. We are tired. It almost feels like we are living in exile, separated from feeling of normalcy.

That idea of exile is another connection with the creation and use of these Psalms of Ascent. That was as the Jewish people were returning from the Babylonian Exile. We saw a bit of that with last week's text, Psalm 120. "5 Woe to me that I dwell in Meshek, that I live among the tents of Kedar!" We talk about not necessarily being ones physically living in foreign lands, but feeling like you are surrounded by people who are not like you, don't share the same culture or priorities of what is important, and in the most extreme cases, people who feel like enemies. However, during the Babylonian Exile, this was the literal circumstance of the Jewish people. They could not worship in the Temple. They could not worship the way they always had, the way that they had encountered God. Sound familiar? Psalm 137 talks about that time. Is Psalm 137 one of the Psalms of Ascent? No. I am going to paraphrase based on a song that was popular in the 1970s. It did stay very faithful to the text:

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down
Yeah we wept, when we remembered Zion*

*When the wicked
Carried us away in captivity
Required from us a song
Now how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*

But then the day came when King Cyrus the Great allowed the return of Jewish people to Jerusalem. Tradition holds that these psalms were sung as people returned. Last week, people longing to return to their home because they are tired. Are you tired? Do you feel tired? Do you feel like you have been in exile? The circumstances of these psalms so closely mirror our current situation, they can provide a pathway for us to return to God as well.

This week's psalm is our next step in the journey our pilgrimage from exile, Psalm 121. This is one of my favorite passages in the Bible. It provides the inspiration for the imagery for this series. Hear the Word of the Lord!

*1 I lift up my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come from?
2 My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
3 He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
4 indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
5 The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
6 the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
7 The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
8 the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.*

The Word of Life!
Thanks be to God!

Last week we had the lament of being surrounded by enemies. This week we can hear it as someone who is about to embark on a long journey. It can be the physical journey like the long journey, on foot of course, from Babylon, as you can see here. Or, it can be the spiritual journey that we take throughout our lives. With detours and meanderings along the way. 2020 could certainly be described that way, whether it is a detour, meandering, or something else, I'm not quite sure.

We look to the hills or our mountains right now, and we might see them as a source of comfort, even our reminder of the Lord, creator of heaven and earth. We can see the beauty and delight in the grandeur, this reminder of the awesome power of God. This is the kind of way that I always

perceived the opening verse of Psalm 121. "I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?" And yet, there is also a wildness there. As we look at this picture of our mountains,



it is a statistical certainty that there are some dangerous predators in there that we can't necessarily perceive in the picture itself. My husband, Rod, was hiking up there with our dog, and they encountered a bear. Yes, the bear climbed a tree, but that didn't have to be the case. Bears are probably getting ready for their long winter's nap if they have not already done that, but still despite the beauty there is still danger there.

If we are talking about the Middle East at that time, in unpopulated areas, mountains certainly meant danger if not wild predators, it could mean bandits or robbers. So, contemplating a long journey, I might lift up my to the hills, I may do it in fear, concerned about the danger I'm about to encounter. Alternatively, it could also be a place of safety and refuge. Heading for the hills. From the crest, you can scan for danger for a long way. Then, the crest can also be the place over which help arrives. I think of Gandalf appearing at the crest of the hill in the Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers with the cavalry when all hope was lost.



And that's the reminder in this psalm. Regardless of what you feel when you look to the hills, relief, awe, beauty, danger, or in desperation about what you are having to face here in the valley on any given day, the next verse is your reminder. Your help comes from the Lord. Who is the Lord? The maker of heaven and earth. That phrase, Maker of heaven and earth, only occurs five times in the Old Testament. All of them in the psalms, three of them in the Psalms of Ascent (here, psalm 124:8 and 134:3). (*Stepping Up*, pg 23) A reminder of who we are actually talking about here.

All of these circumstances are instances when we might call upon this psalm to remind ourselves that God is there, and it's THIS God that neither sleeps nor slumbers. In some ancient traditions, the gods did sleep or hibernate during parts of the year. Our God is watching out for us all the time. For me this psalm is one that I can go to when I am in distress, or even if I feel like I am about to become overwhelmed. I can say the first couple of verses, and I can relax. "1 I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? 2 My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1-2) I remember who God is and who I am, God's beloved child. My prayer for you is that you could receive that kind of comfort when reciting those verses.

That has been one of my challenges to you this month, to read over the Psalms of Ascent. One time through at least, but three times through is better. And, if you would like to have them as your refuge and strength, an ever-present help in time of need, read them every day. Incidentally, that line comes from Psalm 46:1 where it describes God.

If we could only remember how much God is on our side, but in our brokenness and frailty we forget, or at least I forget, even as I try to encourage others. While God is on our side ... and I don't mean that God is "on our side" as opposed to "their side." But, rather God desires us to be successful in our walk with him. God wants us as the church to spread his love in the world through 1) telling people/teaching people about that love; 2) demonstrating that love by helping the hungry, helping people in need by attending to their emotional needs and yes, their spiritual needs. To put it in a more poetic and biblical way, to give light to those who sit in darkness. (c.f. Matthew 5:14-15, Luke 1:79)

God is on our side to successfully build a life, to be a person, to be a church that reflects God's love and glory. God is promising protection, but that is not always going to be comfortable, and yes, we're back in 2020. Again and again the Bible shows God protecting people in the midst of their discomfort and challenging situations. Thinking of the Babylonian Exile specifically, I am reminded of Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were still captives in the Babylonian court. They were forced to work for their captors. They did their work well, but people still plotted against them. They were faithful to the Lord, but they still suffered from captivity. They were most likely among those who went down to the Rivers of Babylon and wept

as they remembered life in Judah in Zion. Did they have to live through adversity? You bet. And yet, God also watched over them during this challenging time. Daniel was thrown into the lions' den. He survived. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace that killed the guards that brought them, but they survived. (c.f. Daniel 1:3-7, 6:1-28, 3:1-30)

In our own time, it's hard to persevere. It's hard to understand the why. Josh Moody gives a great example of how hurting can turn into healing: Think of the surgeon prepping to go into surgery. As he or she prepares, they know in one sense that they are about to do the patient harm. They will cut open the body and use the surgical tools. "The patient will bleed. ... That sounds evil. Yet that surgeon rightly believes that he is following the Hippocratic Oath to 'do no harm.' Harm is not harm when it does good. That is what I think the psalm must be saying. Yes, this may hurt. That is why you are asking for help. Look at the hills, but do not stop there. Go beyond them. Look to the God who made the mountains, who made everything" (Josh Moody, *Journey to Joy: The Psalms of Ascent* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013], 36–37, Kindle).

As we use social distancing and mask wearing to protect our community in the pandemic, we hear about people suffering from the isolation, suffering in so many ways, economically for many. I imagine for extroverted people it is especially hard, but even introverts need to see and interact with people. We make the sacrifice. For ourselves? Well, somewhat, but the primary purpose is to protect others in our community. That should also help us as individuals. It is really to help others. But why do we do it, when it is obviously harmful in some ways to everyone? Because saving their life or their physical health is the greater good. So, what do we do? When it was for the short term, a few weeks, it is suck it up. You can handle anything for three weeks, but after all of that time, we need a better answer than that. We try to mitigate the negatives, the harms in other ways.

All of this is precisely the reason that we as Joseph UMC are not gathering for worship in person right now, despite all the hardship ... especially when corona cases are going up sharply all over the country and even here. The actual number may be relatively small compared with Portland or Boise, but for here 11 new cases in 5 days is significant. And yet, we as social creatures that are linked spiritually, we need to address our need for connection. We need to figure out how we remain the church for our community. One thing that we're doing is putting together UMCOR style hygiene kits for our neighbors in Idaho who are being hit much harder with spikes in corona virus than here. People will be assembling kits at home, but what else *can we do*? It is like the benediction we do every week. Do all the good you *can*. What we can with what we have.

With this in mind over the next week or two I am inviting you to participate in small group discussions to brainstorm how we keep our connection vibrant during this time, and how we continue to be the church for our community. Ingrid Cook has organized some groups, and we

are going to have people meet by video conferencing on Zoom. We can also organize conference calls. We will consider some questions to help us think about creatively supporting each other spiritually. What are we learning in this experience, this journey, this exile from what we considered normal? How do we step up to meet God in this moment of history in our lives?

Because that's what we do to renew ourselves in this marathon. We look to God, and we work with the people and the tools that God gives us to support each other and to continue to be a light in the world. Glory to God!

Amen!