



This week we begin a new worship series specifically designed for this time, this season in history. We need to be renewed. We need a renewed heart, a renewed mind to release some ways of the past, a renewed spirit as we move forward into a new stage in our journey with God, and a renewed hope for what God will provide for us not only in this season but the next for both us as individuals and as the church. That is what this series is all about. We will be helped with this by a special group of Psalms called the Psalms of Ascent. No tricky or confusing wording here. The word ascent here means to go up. Whenever the Israelites talked about going to Jerusalem, to the Temple, their special place to encounter God, they said they were going up, up to Jerusalem, up to encounter God. We will be doing our own ... virtual pilgrimage to God for rest and renewal in our new series, *Rise: Meeting God with the Psalms of Ascent*.

These psalms are wonderful for worship. We can use them as we worship together, of course, but they can also be used in our own personal private worship and prayer time. They are also intended for a journey, for progress, so this can be physical or spiritual. The Hebrew word for ascend also means to go up or to step up.

Anyone need an invitation to go up? Our country is hitting its second or third wave in the pandemic (depending on the region). New areas that seem to have missed it before are being hit very hard. Thus far we, in Wallowa County, have been bypassed for the most part, but we need to remain vigilant. But, it's exhausting. It's exhausting for you. It's exhausting for me too.

Then there are all of the other things going on creating extra stress and anxiety. The health issues for our friends, family, and ourselves quite apart from COVID but also affected by it. Election turmoil. Complicated issues with school and work. Legitimate questions about racism and moving forward with greater equality and equity for all. Any or all of which can make us feel far from God.

What if we thought of this as a time for pilgrimage? We who may feel far from God to have a chance to journey toward God. We may have felt this way *before* the pandemic. God wasn't an essential part of our lives. We were doing fine on our own. Or, we may find ourselves separated from God because of the isolation we feel in pandemic, or all of the things that have piled on.

Why has this happened? Why do I have to do these things? Why do I have to keep doing them? It's plain too hard. I don't want to do it anymore.

We may feel like we are in exile from our friends, from our routines, from what we considered "normal" our whole lives. I saw a joke. "If I knew that the last time I was going to eat in a restaurant was last March, I would have ordered dessert!"

Do you feel down? Tired? Do you need an invitation to go up? God is inviting you to go up. If you can get enough energy to come to worship each week whether it be via Facebook, YouTube, the phone, a printout, how ever you connect, this worship series is for you. God is inviting you to go up.

The Psalms of Ascent is a group of 15 psalms beginning with Psalm 120 and going to 134. If you get out your Bibles and put one hand in Psalm 120 and the other at Psalm 134 you will see that it is not very many pages. This is because they are short. They were, they are, good for memorizing and saying on the road, on a journey.

Have you ever been on a long car journey ... or for some of you, a long motorcycle journey? You're tired of listening to the radio, nothing will tune in anyway. You can't read your book anymore, so you start playing a game. You look for license plates from the different states. How many of you played that game. Oh, there's Illinois. What are they doing in this part of the country? Florida? In the fall? When the Israelites were on the road on the way to Jerusalem for a festival, they would say these psalms.

The Israelites were called to come together three times a year for festivals or feasts. The Bible talks about this in Deuteronomy 16:16-17, *"16 Three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles. No one should appear before the Lord empty-handed: 17 Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you."*

So, people from all over Israel would travel, and of course, many would bring their families with them. Psalm 84 tells us a bit about pilgrimage in verses 5-7:

*5 Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.*

*6 As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.*

*7 They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.*

"Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage." Here the word "blessed" could be translated as "happy." *"[Happy] are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage."* Then in verse 7 *"They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion."* [Emphasis mine.] It is thought that they would say these Psalms on their way to the feasts. The Early Church drew parallels with the Psalms of Ascent and the Christian moving his or her soul closer to God, an internal pilgrimage if you will.

So, let us begin **our** pilgrimage with the first Psalm of Ascent which is? Psalm 120. Today, I will be reading out of The VOICE translation. Hear the Word of the Lord!

- 1 When I was in *deep* trouble, I called out to the Eternal,
and He answered my call.
- 2 *I prayed*: "Protect me, Eternal,
from lips that lie
and tongues poisoned with deceit."
- 3 *Liars*, what will be your prize?
And what will come your way,
O you tongues *poisoned* with deceit?
- 4 *Here's what you can expect*: the archers' arrows honed sharp
as well as the red-hot coals of the broom wood.
- 5 Sorrow is mine, for I am *a foreigner* wandering in Meshech;
I am *a stranger* drifting among the tents of Kedar!
- 6 My soul has roamed much too long
among people who despise peace.
- 7 I am for peace; *I ask for peace*,
but even as I open my mouth,
they are ready to fight.

The Word of Life!

Thanks be to God!

Did anything surprise you about this psalm? Especially after I talked about blessing and happiness, of going up with God? This is a psalm of lament. Verse 5 says, "Sorrow is mine." In the New International translation of the Bible it says, "Woe is me." The truth is that this is an excellent place to start. Why do we need to go up? Because we are low. This psalm is a distress call from someone who is suffering. We think of the journey of the Israelites, they may be coming from far away. Their day to day living is among people who make them feel like outsiders. Meshech was thought to be way to the north between the Black and Caspian Seas in what today would be Georgia or Azerbaijan. The people of Kedar were nomads living to the

south in the Arabian Peninsula. Surrounded by people who don't know God or have any interest to. Or consider, they *felt* like people surrounded by enemies. "I am for peace; I ask for peace, but even as I open my mouth, they are ready to fight." Does anyone feel that way right now? It doesn't seem to matter what the topic or the perspective, people always want to fight. Talk about exhausting.

So, as the journey toward God begins, it's okay, more than that, it's important to say. "This is where I am. This is how I feel." Who do we say it to? We say it to God. "I remember when I've been in trouble before. I called out to you and you answered." It's important to remind ourselves of the faithfulness of God. We all feel like we've been dealing with the pandemic for too long. We've talked before about remembering the faithfulness of God when going through crisis. We talked about it months ago now. We're still dealing with it, and it won't be over tomorrow. Seven months seems like a long time when we thought it was going to be three weeks. But really, even with the longer timeline, it's nothing compared with 40 years wandering in the desert with Moses. It's nothing compared with the 70 years in the Babylonian Exile.

I'm not saying that I expect this to go on for that amount of time. Like the rest of us, I'm ready for it to end today, but still we need to put it in perspective. We're still in it, and God is still faithful. God was faithful in the past and will continue to be faithful. **And**, God will remain faithful when we go to God with our broken hearts. We may feel that people get tired of hearing us pour out our hearts. God never will. What is on your heart right now? What do you need to share with God. God already knows, of course, but part of building relationships is sharing our deepest thoughts and feelings with another. Sure your hair stylist or bartender may be great, even your pastor, but God is your best bet.

Are you ready to begin this journey? How would you fill in this blank as you take your first step up? *Woe is me that I dwell _____ and live among the tents of _____?*

You could your own rendition of Psalm 120 based on what is going on in your life right now. I actually did this for a study about 13 years ago that I will share with you. As I looked at it I was amazed how well it might speak to many today.

*I cry out to you Lord in my despair!
Save me from these people who thwart my every move.
They say they want me to succeed
But I know that they are anxiously awaiting my failure.*

*Heal their hearts, Lord.
You know that I am no threat to them.
I only want them to benefit. I only want to help them.*

Relieve them of their suspicions.

I am doomed to be in this place where I feel that I don't belong.

I am for their good, but they only want to bring continued strife.

Yes, I was in a dark time there, but I was able to step up and out of that pit *with God's help*. We acknowledge that we are there. We talk to God about it, but we don't set up our tent there. We move forward with God.

One of the less pleasant parts of this psalm is that it does not come to an uplifting resolution. My version ended with continued strife. Earlier we heard the ending, "They are ready to fight." Doesn't sound too encouraging, but that's when we have to remember that we are on a journey, we have to step up to the next Psalm of Ascent. The first verses of the next psalm has the resolution. Let me read it to you out of the NIV:

Psalm 120:6-7. "Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. I am a man of peace; but when I speak, they are for war."

Psalm 121:1-2. "I lift up my eyes to the hills -- where does my help come from? My help come from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."

We return to a place of hope and relief. That is part of the beauty of these Psalms of Ascent, the way that they work like stairs or better yet around here a path or trail up the mountain to meet God. That's why I would encourage each of you to read these short psalms as a unit in your personal study as we go through this series.

Like today's psalm, most of them are very short. I encourage you to read them all through this series, or even better, read them all once a week. To really make them a part of you, read them all every day. Truth be told, not all of them are going to connect with you as well as some of the others will. Some of these psalms are among my favorite Bible passages. Others, not so much, but taken together as a group ... powerful. Like we saw today, some fit particularly well together. You progress as you go through them. You step up. You move closer to God.

Another thing that would be helpful to do during this series is to dream dreams. You will have an opportunity to share your thoughts and ideas for how the church can be the church both now, under our very different circumstances and in the future in a post-pandemic world. We have the same goals, the same need to connect people with the love of God, both among ourselves and with others, but we can't do it the way we've always done it. There are brand new ways to do things, but we can also revive classic things ... Like writing letters.

The New Testament is FULL of letters when the community was dispersed all around the Mediterranean. How many of you wrote your sweetheart when you were apart? Or write to your brothers and sisters? I have a feeling that Christmas cards are going to come back in a big way this season. But of course, we have email too, which is still the written word to reach people across the miles.

What can we do to keep our connection strong and invite people in with new ways. What are other things we can do. It is a statistical certainty that you have wonderful ideas that I wouldn't even dream of -- Sot, we have our dream teams. If you have not already be contacted about a dream team, you soon will be. We are trying to do this so you can participate without a computer, but we can still remain safe.

Then, how do we put it into action. This is where our dreams meet reality. We aren't talking about pipe dreams here. How can you support these dreams? Your prayers, your participation, and your gifts. Be thinking about that. Be praying about it. Yes, we will have to be creative, but remember, we are all made in God's image. One of the ways that we are most like God is in our community.

The Bishop said an interesting thing in the first part of her address at the Annual Conference last month. She said, "For the Love of God: Stay at home, wear a mask, keep physical distance, but **don't** hunker down."

What we're hoping to discover is how we in Joseph UMC do that into 2021 and beyond. Part of our renewal is remembering that despite everything going on in our lives, our county, our country, and our world, we are still the people of God, and we are still called to be a beacon of light to those who sit in darkness. Let's go on a pilgrimage journey. Let's Rise. Let's step up to meet God in the mission.

Amen!