



This is our final week in our worship series, *Rise: Meeting God with the Psalms of Ascent*. We have been on a journey, a pilgrimage to rise up, to step up toward an encounter with God. We have done this as a way to renew and refresh ourselves in these Psalms. I have invited, encouraged us to receive the solace, the balm, the encouragement of these Psalms by reading them during the journey of our series. Have you done it? Have you read all 15 Psalms of Ascent? At least once? It's not too late. These are very short Psalms from 120-134.

We have sought to use this opportunity to envision our now and our future. We have and continue to meet and discuss in small groups and over the phone, to figure out what is really important to us as a church and how it might look like in the future, post pandemic, and I'll talk more about that a little later. And, then how we might go into that future together.

In worship we have concentrated on a handful of these Psalms of Ascent. We started in Psalm 120 as exiles living outside the land. In 121 we traveled through dangerous lands with God as our watchman, Maker of Heaven and Earth. Last week with 130, we cried out to the Lord with confidence that the Lord will not fail. This week we have arrived at the destination of our quest with Psalm 134. This week I will be reading from the *Common English Bible*. Hear the Word of the Lord:

- 1 All you who serve the Lord: bless the Lord right now!*
All you who minister in the Lord's house at night: bless God!
- 2 Lift up your hands to the sanctuary*
and bless the Lord!
- 3 May the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth,*
bless you from Zion.

The Word of Life.
Thanks be to God!

We have reached the climax, the apex, of the Psalms of Ascent. We are there, and now is the time. Notice the first verse, "Bless the Lord right now!" There is urgency here. The Common

English Bible says, "now," as does the Holman Christian Bible. The King James translates it as, "Behold," and so does the New King James. Why do I mention it? Because the New International Version, which we normally use, does not include it, but it is there in the Hebrew. It adds power to the command, as if to say, now that you've come so far, do what you came to do.

Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, writes in his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*:

The sentence is an invitation; it is also a command. Having arrived at the place of worship, will we now sit around and tell stories about the trip? Having gotten to the big city, will we spend our time here as tourists, visiting the bazaars, window shopping and trading? Having gotten Jerusalem checked off our list of things to do, will we immediately begin looking for another challenge, another holy place to visit? Will the temple be a place to socialize, receive congratulations from others on our achievement, a place to share gossip and trade stories, a place to make business contacts that will improve our prospects back home? But that is not why you made the trip: bless God. You are here because God blessed you. Now you bless God." (Downers' Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, pg 178).

The Israelites had to go on a physical journey, whether they sang these songs on the way as pilgrims on their way to one of the required feasts three times a year, or they were returning from the Babylonian Exile. They were headed to a particular place, Jerusalem, more specifically the Temple, their sacred space to worship and encounter God. We have a Sanctuary in our church building that we have identified and use as sacred space to encounter the Holy.

However, any place that we are can become sacred space. We merely need to be intentional with it in our minds. We can do things like light candles, have special food and drink, have a Bible or a cross nearby. These things can set the mood, change the familiar and ordinary into the sacred, but these things are not required. We only need to be intentionally encountering God in it. It can help if it can be a place where you won't be distracted. A place where you can be centered and have an attitude of "Lord, your servant is listening."

Wherever you are, you can bless the Lord. That can sound strange. Aren't we blessed by the Lord? Don't we receive blessings from the Lord? The word *bless* is all over this psalm. It doesn't mean exactly the same thing for us as it does for God. It is an unequal exchange. When we bless God we show our gratitude. That is why in some English translations the command to the people is translated "praise the Lord." But, when God blesses us, God must make us what we are not and gives us what we don't have.

The root word of the Hebrew word for *bless* actually means *to kneel*. Humans do it for God as an act of adoration and respect. *To kneel is to offer respect*. Over time in the Hebrew language this word became a euphemism *to bless*. So, in the last verse God blesses us!

Clinton McCann writes, "There is a sense in which God will kneel before the people! In other words, God will voluntarily take on the servant role that properly belongs to the people. This mutuality, which ultimately means God's willingness to be vulnerable, results from God's risky choice of Zion [or Israel]." (J Clinton McCann, "Psalms," Psalm 134, *New Interpreter's Bible Vol 4*, 1996.)

This sentiment reminds me so much of the part of the Last Supper when Jesus knelt before his disciples and washed their feet before his crucifixion the next day. As Beth Moore says, "How blessed would we be today to realize that, as God calls us to "do what we came to do," His mind was also set on doing what He came to do?" (*Stepping Up: A Journey Through the Psalms of Ascent*, Nashville: LifeWay, 2007. 169)

So we are here. We have reached the mountaintop. Let's sit here for a moment savor it. Take a deep breath. As we now prepare to return to the valley of our normal live, hear this psalm also as a blessing as the people prepare to depart and return home. In biblical times, "The worshipers will leave enriched and strengthened, with the [prayer] of divine blessing upon them ringing in their ears.' May that power which has been acknowledged in praise come flooding into [our] own lives." (Leslie Allen, *World Bible Commentary*, pg 218)

That can speak to us so much right now. The realization, not just in our own feeling or from what I tell you, but confirmed in the Word of God that the same God that we seek, enjoy, worship, and praise together -- however, we do it -- remains with us when we are apart.

Even as we are scattered for this relatively short time. It feels long, but it is really short contrasted with the fullness of time. Even as we are scattered, we remain the Body of Christ, connected by the Holy Spirit.

Amen!

Estimate of Giving for 2021

As we move forward we need reminders of that connection. We need to renew our vision and adapt it for our current realities.

George Bullard's pivotal work, *The Life Cycle and Stages of a Congregation*, reinforces what the author of Proverbs once said, "Without a vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18, KJV). It turns out this proverb holds true for churches, too. Bullard demonstrates that congregational vitality hinges on one key dynamic. This dynamic is maintaining and re-invention of a vitalizing

vision. Programs, people, and proper management aren't enough. Even money isn't enough. Without a vision, not only do people perish but so do churches. This is especially true in the time of COVID.

Rebekah Simon-Peter has found in work she does with churches around the country that perhaps just one-fourth of ministries are outward focused and designed to transform the status quo. The vast majority of ministries are inward-focused, intended strictly to comfort its members and attenders. Even as churches are coming back together, having a new vision is critical.

Many in American Christianity have stopped trying to do the extraordinary and switched to cruise control. Cruise control is excellent, as long as it works. But in older cars, as in older congregations, cruise control is not known for its durability.

Rebekah talks about how she used to drive a 1995 Toyota Rav 4. She loved the way it looked, felt, and drove. That is until the cruise control stopped working. In those days, the legal speed limit in Wyoming was seventy miles per hour. She would set her speed for seventy-two, cruising paved-over prairies lined with sagebrush under the shadow of rising mountain peaks. Before long, her seventy-two speed gave way to seventy, then slipped down to sixty-five miles per hour. It was hard to tell when the cruise control first disengaged. She would think she was maintaining her speed until other vehicles appeared on the lonely highway and passed her. The same is true in older congregations. We can't stay in aging cruise control long without losing momentum. Before we know it, we've slowed down to a crawl, and it's all about survival.

The survival mode isn't working for most congregations. Especially now. When faced with the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic and all its fallout, a vision is more important than ever. It reminds us that we have a say in how the future goes. That we're not just called to steward a building or a budget, but the dreams of Jesus.

Every time I've gotten discouraged enough to consider walking away from the people who gather in Jesus' name or from the religious community that honors him, my waking vision of Jesus stops me. The same vision from years ago reminds me that he was intentional about **coming to me**. Out of that profound encounter, I've developed **my Jesus-like dream**, which guides **my ministry**. That's the power of **vision**. It calls you back. It reminds you **why** you do what you do.

When we operate without a vision, not only do we suffer, so does our community. When we refuse to exercise our right to dream like Jesus, when survival becomes more important than service, the community we serve becomes spiritually impoverished.

Bottom line: if we are just going through the motions of doing church rather than **being** church, of stewarding budgets and buildings rather than **the dreams of Jesus**, it's time to bring the miraculous back. We have to renew our vision of Jesus.*

The last couple of weeks, groups have been meeting to talk about our vision of the future for Joseph UMC in the midst of pandemic and in the future. The conversations are on-going, but already I can see some patterns emerging. One is about relationships. One thing that our pandemic isolation has taught us is how important relationships are, perhaps how much we take them for granted. This is true among ourselves as a congregation.

That may sound inward focused, but it is important that we strengthen our relationship together. That helps know that we are not alone when we have to face difficult challenges. It might be needing someone to pick up a loaf of bread because we don't feel comfortable leaving the house. It could be that we are dealing with a health diagnosis ourselves or for someone we love. Someone who will pray with us. Maybe we are just having a bad day, and we need someone to call who will just listen. Not necessarily try to fix it, give advice, or invalidate how we are feeling in that moment.

Having someone that you can call is part of what being a church family is all about. We have received great ideas about how to rebuild relationships that may have faded or drifted a bit during the pandemic. You've already heard some of that with our Zoom Love Feast/Potluck next week. Relationships within the congregation are so important.

But, we can't leave it there. We're not a club. We are the church of God. Part of that mission is sharing the love of God with our community, to be a light in the darkness. How did Jesus do that? By building relationships with people. From the very first, he went up and talked to individual people. He stepped into their lives. *Hey you fishermen, follow me and I'll make you fishers of men.* He took 12 people from very different backgrounds, and more, and he built special relationships with them. Then, they met the people where they were. Developed relationships with them. How do we develop relationships with the people in our community?

One way is our online ministry. Some of our relationship building in the community is going to be limited right now because of the pandemic, but the pandemic is not always going to be here. Just in the news this week, there were reports of not just one but two very effective vaccines that are coming our way. Not tomorrow, but they're coming, probably in the spring. We will be able to interact directly with our neighbors again. But how can we build relationships with them?

Right now we do many things that show we care such as our work with: the Food Bank, the Hygiene Kits, the Blessing Box are fine. They are great, but they don't build relationships. We've had a relationship with the school through the Magic Garden and the Children's Christmas Store.

Is there a way we can do something that is more relationship building? We've tried some things to meet our neighbors. What else can we try? One of the suggestions was to build relationships with the Nez Perce to foster reconciliation there. I'm using the word "relationships" a lot. What I really mean is make friends. Be a friend. Show hospitality, not just to be friendly but because we care about them as an individual person.

With everything that people have been through with the pandemic and changes in society, the church is going to be more important than ever. Let's rise to the challenge. It's more than a challenge; it's an opportunity. Our desire to be a light and share God's love with each other and the community had been in this church long before I got here. It was one of the many things I was grateful for when I arrived here. But, we can't be stuck in cruise control. One of the blessings of the pandemic is the opportunity to hit the reset button, stop, and take a look at what is most important to us. What makes us a church, and where should we focus our time and energy? We don't have all the answers yet. Sometimes what's most important is asking the right questions.

The question that I am asking you right now is how can you be a part of this? I am asking you to invest in this dream of being a church that makes a difference in the lives of the people in it as well as the people around it. We are a church that loves people, and we do that by caring what happens in their lives. We share the love and nurturing that we receive from God, not just by telling people about it, but by demonstrating that love and caring to people. Has God forgotten you? No, God has not forgotten about you. How can we show others that God has not forgotten about them either?

This is the week that we would normally turn in our estimate of giving cards during the worship service. Offer them as an act of worship, and then bless them and consecrate them. Just like everything else, we have to do it a bit different this year. I hope you have been praying over what you plan to give in the coming year. Or perhaps I should say what portion of the blessings God has entrusted you with you plan on returning to God's church. After all, we are not the owners of what God has blessed us with, we are merely stewards, blessed with the opportunity to use what God has entrusted us with for a time.

Indeed, stewardship is really about blessings. God blesses us and asks us in turn to bless others out of what we have received. And the amazing thing is that, when we use those blessings to bless others, those blessing have a way of returning to bless us again.

As I said, this year we are doing things a bit differently. We have mailed everyone an estimate of giving card. If you have not already, you should receive it soon. I invite you to return by mail. I invite you join us in this journey into the future. It is through your faithful giving that makes it possible. Thank you for your generosity!

Now, both as a celebration and as an opportunity to prepare our hearts for prayer time, I invite you to sing "I'm Falling on My Knees."

* Excerpted and adapted from *Dream Like Jesus: Deepen Your Faith and Bring the Impossible to Life* (Market Square, 2019.)

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