

Let's Sing a Song of Ascents!

Psalm 121

Welcome to Asbury UMC. I have said this greeting for the last 6 months to a camera. Finally, I can greet you face to face! Good to see all of you who are here at the church and at home. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit our society, I had to make a decision to cancel our in-person worship service. It was a difficult decision. However, making the decision to reopen the church is much harder than I expected. Covid-19 is not over yet but we cannot indefinitely wait until everything gets back to normal. Just like everyone else, we need to embrace a new normal.

When we first started considering re-opening the church building, the New England conference hosted a webinar about how to safely reopen the church building. One speaker said, "you can't make everyone happy." Some will not be happy with reopening the church building. Some will not be happy with not opening the church building. That's true. So, our church is offering both in-person and live streaming online worship services. I hope this makes everyone happy. Please join the worship service in the way you feel most comfortable and safe.

What is your biggest fear?

How did you feel when you came to the church this morning? I bet coming to the church felt very different from what it used to. Right? You have to wear a mask and keep social distance from one another. More importantly, you may not be able to sit in the same pew you had for several decades. Also, you may feel anxious about coming to the church because of Covid-19. We have never felt nervous or in danger coming to the church but the world has been completely changed by Covid-19. However, coming to church had not been easy for many centuries. Do you know where early Christians gathered for worship when the Roman empire persecuted Christianity? They gathered in underground tombs, called, catacombs. It was dark, smelly, unsanitary and even scary unlike our beautiful sanctuary. But, they went to underground catacombs for worship. I am pretty sure that they would not feel safe or pleasant going into a grave for worship. Right?

Even the author of Psalm 121 did not feel safe going to the house of God. Psalm 121 is known as a "Song of Ascent." This song was sung by pilgrims who made their journey to Jerusalem for annual festivals and worship. At that time, there were no police or nationwide law enforcers so travel was always risky. Robbers were a common threat to travelers. Venomous snakes and scorpions lurked under rocks and sands. Wild animals, rivers, scorching heat from the Sun... there are many dangers on the road to the house of worship. Just as we may be feeling today, the pilgrims to Jerusalem also felt anxious and nervous about going to the house of worship.

What is your biggest fear in coming to the church this morning? Of course, Covid-19. It's the same with me. Since we can't see this small virus, we worry if any of us may unknowingly carry it. But we have to admit that risk is an innate part of life. We may fear Covid-19 now, but there are many other risks and dangers we may face in our daily lives. Car accidents, some crazy people with guns, economic recession, corruption, stroke, cancer, natural disasters ... risk is a part of life. And we try to avoid potential risks. That's how we survive.

But surviving is not living. To live a full life, we sometimes have to take risks. Some say, "A ship in harbour is safe, but that is not what ships are built for." God wants us to live, not just survive. It doesn't mean that we have to be daredevils all the time, recklessly assuming, "God will protect us." That's not faith. There is a difference between faith and stupidity. That's why

we wear a mask and maintain social distance from one another and that is why we are also offering worship services online. But we also need to make sure that our life is not driven by fear but by faith.

From Where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord

When the psalmist knew the potential dangers on the road to the house of God, he naturally raised a question, “from where will my help come?” The psalmist answers his own question with a confession of faith: “My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.” He confesses “God alone can sustain the life of the pilgrim.” If we have this simply faith, our lives will not be driven by fear and we can sometimes take a risk for our faith journey.

Although we know it and confess it with our lips, really trusting God alone is not easy. It’s the same for pastors. As you know, my first appointment in Korea was at a very small church in a rural area, and there were no church members when I first got there. This meant that I needed to find a means of financial support. Thankfully, I was able to receive enough financial support from other churches so I could pay my rent and utility bills and save the rest. The problem was that I had to pay for heat during the winter. It costs almost \$700 to fill the tank and needed to be filled at least two times during winter. Rent was \$200 per month so the cost of fuel was not a small amount of money. Whenever I paid for fuel, I felt some emptiness in a part of my mind and became anxious without reason. So do you know what I did? I began to save money that I received from other churches for the upcoming winter.

One day in my second year of ministry, I looked outside the widow, dreading the coming of winter. I sighed. “Well, another winter is coming. The season of cold. The time of consuming a lot of savings.” I worried about increased fuel prices for months. Then, suddenly a thought came to my mind. “Hey son. Do you believe in me or money?” I realized that I was not depending on God, but on money. I worried so much about paying bills for the coming winter, that I could not do what God wanted me to do in my church. In addition, I was always anxious about maintaining the church building. I did not spend any money on my neighbors or missions, but instead, saved all my money to keep the boiler working during the winter. That shouldn’t be the main purpose of the church. Right? Keeping the boiler running during the winter is not the purpose of the church. I was not being a faithful pastor.

After hearing God’s voice, saying “do you believe in me or money?” I felt that I needed to do something to overcome my fear of the future that distracted me from carrying out God’s mission. About thirteen hundred dollars were in my saving account so I sent \$1000 dollars to my friend who was preparing an evening school for poor children and youth. Do you know what happened next? Nothing. I thought that it would be a big problem not saving enough for fuel... but it was o.k. Nothing happened. The gas tank was not full... but the boiler did not stop for lack of gas. God provided me with what I needed... through many people and churches... at the right time. Our God is good and faithful. Of course, I sometime worry, but this experience helped me to trust God who is the sustainer and protector of our lives.

Who is this God?

Think about what you fear the most. What is your biggest fear? Please name it and then say, “from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who make heaven and earth.” Do you fear Covid-19? “From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth”; Do you fear economic recession? “from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”; Do you fear infirmity? “from

where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”; Do you fear whether young people will ever come back to the church? “from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Whenever you feel anxious, remember, “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

- 5 The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
- 6 The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
- 7 The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
- 8 The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

Amen.

We are going through the Covid-19 pandemic and it will eventually be over. After this pandemic is over, I am sure there will be other challenges for us and our church. That’s life. But when those times come, God will be with us and continue to protect us. “The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.” With faith in our faithful God, let us continue our life journey together! Amen.