



Pentecost Sunday

Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So!

Psalm 107:1-9; Psalm 124

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Skyline Presbyterian Church

Our journey of ascent continues as we make our way to Zion. Like the pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem, so we have to continue in the same direction, and keep ourselves under control and become obedient to the demands of the journey. It is indeed a long obedience in the same direction. Climbing the mountain, we focus on the goal and keep going until we reach the summit.

Both our scriptures today speak to the idea of people who are in great distress and cry out to the Lord and find His sure deliverance. What I want to look at as we make our way through these scriptures is perhaps a little bit different tack than what we might expect so I ask you to follow along with me.

The first thing that we see in these scriptures is a people following after God and life happens to them. As Jesus said, in this world, i.e. this life, you will have tribulation. Life can happen to anyone of us. Life – its mishaps, collisions, disasters, major calamities, sickness... whatever it is, it can happen. No one is immune.

There's a story about a man who lived in Chicago. He was a good Presbyterian; a follower of Jesus. He was a wealthy lawyer and business man. He and his wife had 5 children: a son and four daughters. At the age of four the son contracted scarlet fever and died. After the shock, they decided to take a vacation and get away and they made plans to go to Europe. Because of some business that had to be completed the man sent his wife and daughters on ahead with plans to meet in England. He said goodbye and his family boarded the ship and set sail. A while later he received a telegram from his wife which simply said, "Survived alone." In the North Atlantic, their ship collided with a freighter and sank, and all 4 daughters, ages 2 to 8, went down with the ship. The man left immediately to join his wife in England. Standing at the rail, over the spot where his family's ship went down, this man was inspired to write a poem. That poem is in our hymnal, #519, "It Is Well with My Soul."

The man was Horatio Spafford. He and his wife had three more children after this: a son and two more daughters. His second son also died of scarlet fever at the age of 3; but he and his wife and their two daughters gave up all that they had in Chicago and moved to Palestine. They settled in Jerusalem and started a ministry called "The American Colony." It was an aid ministry to the poor of the Holy Land. Today, that work still survives in the Old City of Jerusalem as the Spafford Center. It is a school, an orphanage and an aid center for the poor.

Tragedy - it can happen to any of us. But, what happens to one of us happens to us all. The entire community is affected. Look at the words in these psalms, the words "we" and "our." These things happened to individuals but the affect was on the whole community. Think of the brothers and sisters that we have lost. Yes, most certainly the immediate family was in mourning but think again, were we not all affected as well? Didn't each of us feel the loss too? Just so, when one of us is sick, or in pain, we all are affected; if it were not so, then we would not have such an active prayer chain and we would not hear the testimonies about how "I felt your prayers during that time."

This is the first point I want to make about these psalms. As we read in 124, "*If the Lord had not been on our side...*" These things happened to individuals but they also happened to the entire community. Sometimes it feels like wave after wave keeps hitting us and that's when we can feel alone, and forgotten but that is exactly when we have to look up and know for certain, "*If the Lord was not on our side...we would be swept away.*" But God does not give us more than we can handle and will, with that trial, provide a way of escape.

In this psalm the writer uses two examples. One is of being swallowed up. This speaks to an image of a dragon or sea serpent. These are images of our fears, of our imaginations thinking of all of the horrible things that could overtake us and hurt us. These dragons are total evil, and evil does exist!

The second image, of being engulfed, being swept over, being swept away are, as stated, images of a flood. The flood speaks to sudden disaster; the kind that can strike without warning. In Palestine the wilderness is a web of wadis, which are really riverbeds, which nine months of the year are dry as a bone. But during the winter, the rainy season, the rain comes down in ways that we in the Northwest would find astonishing. As this rain water runs down the sides of the mountains, filling the wadis, making these rivers flow once again, a flash flood of tremendous proportions can happen in a moment's notice and destruction will overtake anyone or anything that's in its way.

"Had the Lord not been on our side..." this is how we would have been in times of distress, trouble, disaster. But we are not like those without hope. Time and chance may happen to anyone of us BUT...we know the One who is rolling the dice and He has not left us alone. He is always beside us; as Paul says, "*He will, with the trial, provide a way of escape.*"

This is what the psalmist goes on to say. "*We have escaped like a bird from a fowler's snare; the snare has been broken and we have escaped.*" The psalmist completes this thought with the declaration: "*Our help is in the name of the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth.*" Isn't this the same thing that Jesus told us: "*In this life you will have tribulation...?*" That's not a fun thought, but Jesus didn't stop there. He completes that thought with very similar words to the psalmist. He continues by saying, "...*but fear not! I have overcome the world.*" God has not left us alone. Remember too, that Jesus spoke these words before His resurrection! Already He knew the power of God, the love of God, the overcoming might of His Spirit and He still had to face the humiliation, the torture, and the pain of the crucifixion. Yet, He knew, He was convinced of the power of God that would keep Him even through all of that; the power of God that would break the snare, that would release Him like a bird. Are we convinced of that power in our lives? Do we face our own troubles personally or as a community with the assurance and hope that God is with us every moment, and will take care of us. Or, do we grovel at the feet of the giant trouble that is overwhelming us as if we have no hope?

I'd like you all to turn in the hymnals to hymn, #519, "**It is Well With My Soul**" because I want to show you a mistake that we have been singing for many years. We read in our hymnals "...*thou hast taught me to say...*" This is wrong. I have seen copies of Mr. Spafford's original poem and the words he wrote down were "*whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to KNOW...*" He did not just say it as one says a mantra or as a positive confession. Mr. Spafford knew it. Standing at the ship's rail over the very spot where his four daughters perished in that sinking ship, he wrote, "*thou has taught me to know, it is well with my soul.*"

And that brings me to the second point of these two psalms. In 124, the psalmist says, "*If the Lord had not been on our side.*" Let everyone say it, "**IF THE LORD HAD NOT BEEN ON OUR SIDE...**" Psalm 107 says, "*Give thanks to the Lord for He is good; His love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so...*" In each of these psalms the believers are called forth to declare the goodness of the Lord. Each psalm goes through a litany of the things that have happened, in which they came

to know the saving grace of the Lord, and they are instructed to declare it! Yes Israel, we've had times of defeat, sorrow, anguish, captivity, times when we felt we would be totally snuffed out but we have seen the saving hand of God each time and like a bird released from the snare we have been released and saved from these things. What does a bird do when it's released from a trap? It flies away, and sings its heart out because it has been set free.

Just so the psalmist instructs the people to tell about it. Don't be quiet! Let the redeemed of the Lord say so! This is what Pastor Robyn was getting at when she posed the question to us, "Do we really believe that our neighbors, our friends, our family members, our co-workers, need to know Jesus?" "Do we believe that they would be better for knowing Him or are we satisfied that we know Him and hope that maybe they will come to know Him also?

We are instructed how can they know unless someone preaches, i.e. tells them. I am convinced that everything that happens in our life is not just a good or bad thing which we have to just get through and then come out stronger. As each of these psalms declares, "*let the redeemed of the Lord say so;*" and again, "*let all of Israel say, 'had the Lord not been on our side...'*" When we have had a great thing happen in our lives, one that brings immense joy to us, aren't we so glad that we want to run around and tell everyone? We cannot contain ourselves because we are so happy and thrilled of the good fortune that has come our way. How about when something horrible, something awful happens to us. Are we equally prepared to declare that from the rooftops? Why not? What a witness! To be able to say, "Hey, I'm in the midst of the worst time of my life...but you know what? God is still with me! God hasn't left me! I feel like I'm being swallowed by a raging beast, like I'm being overwhelmed by flood but you know what? I'm not afraid because I know that God is with me." Like Jesus, we may not yet be on the other side of it, but still we can declare, as Paul did, "*I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him, against that day.*" Mr. Spafford knew it and that's why he could write that hymn. My friends it is time we began to declare the work of God within our lives.

Throughout history, there have been forces, the evil one, who have tried to stop the mouth of God's people from declaring His victory over this world. Times of great prosperity; times of authoritarian rulers who only wanted their opinions declared; times of war and intense opposition but it has been those who broke through, those who realized they could not be kept down, those who found freedom as a bird released from a trap who stood up and declared the works of the Lord and who found the freedom to which He set us free. We have Martin Luther who saw his church in desperate straits and against all odds, stood up to declare the whole councils of God. There are those like Joan of Arc, Madame Guyon, Mother Theresa, John Calvin, John and Charles Wesley, and a host of others who could not be contained but had to tell the wonders and goodness and grace of God that was available to everyone. They not only told about it, they demonstrated it in their lives as well.

It was not only those well known names, it was also the moms and dads, the carpenters, the soldiers, the farmers, the business people, the unknown ones, about whom we will never know – these who simply lived ordinary lives, who with grace and humility, simply told the ones in their circles about the love and power of God that they had come to know. The God who sustained them through the famines, the plagues, the dust storms, the economic collapses, the wars and the floods. Everyday people who in the midst of these things, not having yet seen the other side, but who in the midst could look the others in the eye and say with boldness and confidence, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and I shall yet, I shall continue to praise Him!"

There has been discussion of late as to the future of Skyline. Will we be here in 10, 20, or more years? We have seen previously strong congregations close their doors because they had gotten to a place where they could no longer sustain a parish life. Personally, I don't believe that is a picture of us. I think that God is doing something among us. I believe that there is a new work of the Spirit in this place but I believe too, that it rests upon us. It is going to take us finding new paths, new ways of doing ministry and that is going to hinge on whether or not we are a people who will stand up and declare the goodness of God or

be silent because we are afraid of offending someone.

From personal experience I can tell you that all it takes is for real people, experiencing life in all of its beauty and harshness, and not being afraid to say so – that is what will bring new life and new history, to us here at Skyline. It is each one of us, climbing the mountain, keeping focused on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, one foot in front of the other, following the long obedience in the same direction. That is what will sustain us, that is what will keep us. Then, as the psalmist says, it is for us to declare this to those around us, our friends, families and co-workers. Anytime there is opportunity; it is for us to say, "*Had the Lord not been on our side...I would have been swallowed in the flood.*" You don't have to be on the other side of it, but simply be convinced that in the midst of it God has your back.

This is the witness we can proclaim. "*Our help is in the name of the Lord. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!*"

Amen.