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# Journey to Worship

Psalm 124

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 2, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

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In the earliest days of stay at home orders and people adapting to working from home, there were regular conversations about learning how to enable home to be both a place of rest and retreat from the rhythms of work and the actual workplace itself. Whether a person's work was attending school or university courses or learning how to virtualize programs for students or some other thing, many people were interested in creating a structure that allowed for good transitions between times of work and times of rest. Folks suggested all manner of strategies to help get people in the right frame of mind for their workday to begin and end. Here are just a few of the strategies I heard: wear work shoes and home shoes; if possible, set aside a room that is only for work such as a study or guest bedroom; go for a walk in order to get to work; leave one door of the house and enter through another door that is essentially only used for work. Utilizing a ritual or pattern to prepare for work is intended to help with transitions, enhance productivity, and create needed space between work and home.

Sundays are a day of work for us. Worship, after all, is the most critical work of all God's creation. Perhaps worship doesn't feel like "work" per se because it is what we were created to do with our whole lives. A human life fully lived is worshipful. Yet, the specific gathering, even virtually, of the body of Christ for worship is centered on the encounter with God through the work of the people designed to honor, praise, and glorify the Lord. I suspect for some, learning to "go to worship" while staying at home has been a struggle that perhaps has been aided by establishing rituals or patterns to prepare yourself for this time. Maybe you've employed some of the same strategies I've already mentioned. I hope you'll find some encouragement this morning in knowing that using specific patterns to prepare for an encounter with God has quite a history to it. It's not simply confined to our current situation.

One part of that history is found in our Psalm this morning. Psalm 124 is one of fifteen psalms that begin with the word meaning "song of ascent." Psalms 120-134 are relatively short prayers most likely used by God's people as they journeyed to Jerusalem for feasts, festivals, and other acts of worship in the temple. As you may know, Jerusalem was built on the top of a hill, so anyone who was approaching the city would have to ascend, to go up, in order to get there. This journey of ascending in order to meet with God allowed God's people to have time to prepare themselves for the encounter. The people prayed using these psalms as they journeyed to worship. And as they prayed, the journey itself became a time of faithfully remembering God's activity and presence in their individual and corporate lives and giving God thanks and praise for it. That is to say, the journey itself became an act of worship.

As we continue to adjust to different patterns and rhythms of our lives and persist with online gatherings in place of face-to-face ones, perhaps the psalms of ascent can aid us in preparing our whole selves for worship, not just on Sundays but for every day. Gaining understanding about the journey to worship will provide for us a model for our worship. So let's attend to Psalm 124 together this morning. The psalm begins with a repeated refrain rooted in recalling God's active presence in the lives of the people: "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side..." How many times has this conditional phrase reminded us of the conditions for redemption, rescue, and

restoration for God's people? For us? For you? If it had not been the Lord on their side, where would God's people be? It is crucial for us to remember that if not for God, as Lin-Manuel Miranda so aptly put it, "devastation [would reign]" and the people would see their future "drip, dripping down the drain." Let Israel say, "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side..."

The psalm writer calls to mind with this simple phrase a host of memories of the Lord's work on behalf of the people, and he directs all of Israel to proclaim the phrase as they recall the Lord's hands on and intimate saving activity. "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, let Israel say..." Can't you hear this refrain reverberating throughout history as the people gather to worship the Lord who time and again came to their rescue. Surely you can hear God's people following Moses out of their bondage and captivity in Egypt. You know the story of how after God sent plague after plague, Pharaoh relented and released God's people. The Lord led them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night until they reached the sea. Much to their dismay, Pharaoh had changed his mind and pursued them to enslave them again. There at the sea where they were pinned in by the raging wrath of Pharaoh's Egyptian army on one side and the raging waters of the sea on the other, the people needed the Lord on their side. We can hear the words echo through time from this story: "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose against us then they would have swallowed us alive, then the waters would have engulfed us."

You can hear others saying it, too. Listen as the people remember David and the Israelites escaping certain death from the Philistines and their ultimate warrior, Goliath. "If it had not been the Lord on our side." Or tune your ears as the people recall Daniel thrown in the pit of lions for having been faithful in the face of the jealous rage of the King Darius's advisors. If it had not been the Lord on his side, he would have been devoured alive. Or pay attention to the refrain ringing into the New Testament as Jesus's disciples remember the time they were on a boat, scared to death of the raging waters around them. You remember the story of how they hurriedly woke Jesus, who promptly calmed the storm simply speaking "Peace! Be still!" (Mark 4:35-41). If it had not been the Lord on their side, the waters would have engulfed them. The refrain echoes through the ages, even to our present time, as the faithful remember how God has shown up to protect, rescue, deliver, and set free. Can't you hear the refrain on the lips of civil rights leaders both past and present—leaders like John Lewis—who escaped the bitter rage of people who rose against them as they worked for a more equitable and just country? If it had not been the Lord?

Maybe you have your own stories of the Lord coming to your rescue personally or corporately. If it had not been for the Lord, perhaps the denominational disagreement would have destroyed your church; the loss of your family's matriarch would have meant relational ruin; your battle with depression would have devoured you; your parents' divorce would have engulfed you; the bitterness from broken trust would have wrecked you; the failed course or the failed business would have crushed you; the harm from macro and micro-aggressions of all kinds would have torn you apart. I wonder if it had not been for the Lord, where would you be? If the Lord had not been working for your good long before you ever knew you even needed it, if it had not been for the Lord going ahead of you and coming behind you, hemming you in on every side, where would you be? If it had not been the Lord on your side, where would your life's journey have led? Would it have led to worship or simply to woe?

Remembering these stories of God's people, remembering our own stories of God's rescue and protection, of redemption and new life, leads us up, raises our hearts and minds, bodies and spirits, into the presence of God where we worship. Whether we are at home on our couches,

outside under a tent, in a clearing in the woods, or in a grand building, the process of remembering the Lord's presence guides us into worship. What comes after this remembering is almost a natural outpouring, a springing up, an eruption in response to God's abundant mercy and grace. After remembering the Lord's work on behalf of the people, the psalmist proclaims, "Blessed be the Lord." Blessing, praise, adoration, and thanksgiving spring forth from the hearts and minds of those who recognize and remember the Lord's work in their lives. Perhaps you've witnessed this happen in others or experienced it yourself. I'll never forget the saints in the churches in which I grew up who were moved to tears as they waved their hankies and shouted in praise. Their outpouring of praise came every time we sang about Jesus shedding his blood on the cross for the salvation and rescue of all people, and specifically for them. They experienced somewhere deep within them the truth of "If it had not been the Lord" that ultimately leads to "Blessed be the Lord."

Remembering God's helping, saving, and protecting work leads to praising and blessing the Lord. And on this journey of ascent, the psalm writer will not let the people forget the past, the present, or the future. Say it with me the psalmist says as he looks to the past, "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side." Then, he makes the natural turn to praise. The exaltation and adoration of God flows in the present when we recognize the goodness of the Lord to us. "Blessed be the Lord." And finally to end the song, the psalmist highlights the present and future hope rooted in the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. "Our help is in the name of the Lord." Echoes of other psalms reverberate through this phrase, especially Psalm 121: "I lift my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Both personally and corporately the psalms invite us to look to the future, with all the problems, struggles, and trials that will inevitably come in view. And as we look there, we have confidence because the Lord who has been there for us continues to be our future hope and help.

Recognizing the Lord as our help enables us to turn time and again to God in our work and our worship, in our troubles and our triumphs, in our petitions and our praises. James surely knew this when he wrote his letter to the early communities of Jesus's disciples. Because the Lord who had been for them is the Lord who is and would be their help, James instructed the early Christ followers to turn to the Lord in prayer. "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:13-14). James and the psalmist both understood that we all are in need of help. We all stand in the need of prayer. And no matter how much we would rather ignore our neediness or pretend we are capable on our own, eventually we will come to the place where our solutions fail and our strength is insufficient. And then the only thing left to do be embraced by the One who is our help. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Thanks be to God that the One who is our help is the One who hung the stars in space and sculpted the mountains in their grandeur. Whether we easily recognize our need for help or are late to admit it, it is good news that the God who holds the whole world in God's hand is the God who holds us, too.

So as we journey to worship, today and every day, and even as the journey itself becomes an act of worship, we do so remembering, blessing, and praying to the Lord. Preparing our lives for worship and the act of worship itself is as simple and as challenging as these three things: remembering, blessing, praying. May the Lord who is for you grant you grace to remember, bless, and pray each and every day. Amen.