

Call to Worship Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

**He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.**

The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

**The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.**

Prayer of Invocation

**Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the
fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and we shall be created and
you shall renew the face of the earth.**

**O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the
faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and
ever enjoy your consolations, through Christ the Lord, Amen.**

The Word Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;

Then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."
The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb!
May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy!

Those who go forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
Shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Living the Word

"Follow the yellow brick road, follow the yellow brick road. Follow, follow, follow, follow, follow the yellow-brick road. You're off to see the Wizard, the Wonderful Wizard of Oz."

And in our minds we see the munchkins leading and dancing around Dorothy and Toto as they begin stepping forward on their journey to get home. We have all seen the movie many times so we already know that the journey will be difficult, but friends will join her along the way and she will make it, just to find she had the power within her all along to get there herself.

The songs of ascent: the songs that are sung on the way; the ones that we sing on the way to something or somewhere. the ones that pop in your head, like a follow up to a situation; the ones we sing to get through the best of times and the worst of times; the ones that bring us closer, in our lives, on our ascent to God. Often these songs give us clues to an easier answer, if we can just recognize that the answer was there all along, if we had just taken the journey, traveling closer with God.

We read as our 'Call to Worship': Psalm 121 – "*From where will my help come?*" These Psalms and songs are the ones that remind us that we are never alone on this journey of life. We need to sing them over and over to remind ourselves that sometimes when the journey is tough we just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other to get through to better times.

I invite you to remain seated and sing with me #555 'Forward Through the Ages' - This is a marching song. We don't march so much anymore, but the beat gives us the feeling of the 'pomp and circumstance' of military order, along with the words 'in unbroken lines.' Of course many of us first learned this hymn as "Onward Christian Soldiers" but as Christians trying to move away from the notions of war against others, the words have been changes to be less militant.

Still, there is power in the words as they recognize that though each of our gifts differ, we can have hearts of one accord. Also that we never win or fall alone, but as each lose, we all lose and as each win, we all win. "Move we on together to the shining goal" are the specific words of ascent that give us the feeling of moving toward God. This hymn is not sung as often as some others, but it's still a good 'ole hymn as we seek God together.

We have shared for 'The Word': Psalm 126 – How happy we feel when our happiness is restored. After the crisis's in life, can come better times. Verse 4 says "*Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.*" Negeb is the desert, which gives meaning to this line – no one expects to find water courses in the desert, and that is how we feel in the midst of fear and grief. But God can do mighty things in our lives to refresh and restore us.

"May those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves." These words are filled with hope for us to hang on until we can see the sprouts from the seeds that were there all along and will grow to maturity into the food they were planted for.

Disaster and grief are hard. When we can sing, pouring out our souls in lament to God, we are able to share the pain of others and find the sprouts of wellness beginning to heal us. By reaching for God in all circumstances, we can get there to find the healing we need. There are songs that are like the yellow brick road, that wind us around for a long journey before we get to the end. As a child we would go to Spooner to my grandparent's cabin.

Uncle Gaylord had a cabin right next door. He also had a tractor and wagon with which he would drive us through the woods to the blueberry patch. The cousins would ride on the back of the wagon with our legs swinging and knowing that it was going to be a long, slow journey, we would sing the song "Found a Peanut."

As we lazed through the forest, in no hurry for anything, we sang all thirteen verses: If you know it, join me in the first verse: "*Found a peanut, found a peanut, found a peanut just now. Just now I found a peanut, found a peanut just now.*" That is enough for now, but the other verses were: cracked it open, found it rotten, ate it anyway, got a side ache, called the doctor, Appendicitis, operation, died anyway, went to heaven, kicked an angel, back to earth, found a peanut...and the song began again.

I know there are other versions of the song, but this is the one we sang, slow and lazy through the woods, over and over 'til we reached our destination. Our reaching toward God is sometimes like this. We keep moving in a circle or following a yellow brick road to nowhere, just to find that God was always within reach, but we have been reaching in the wrong direction or moving too slowly to catch the dream God has for us.

I invite you now to turn to #845 in the hymnal. Psalm 122, let's read it responsively.

¹I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

²**Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.**

³Jerusalem is built as a city that is bound firmly together. ⁴To which the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, to give thanks to the name of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel.

⁵**Thrones for judgment were set there, the thrones of the house of David.**

⁶Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! **"May they prosper who love you!**

⁷**Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers."**

⁸For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you!"

⁹**For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.**

A Few weeks ago we talked about making Zion/Jerusalem/heaven/God, our goals. For the Hebrew people, the actual physical pilgrimage to Jerusalem was one to be taken as often as possible. At least annually for the Passover feast. If you remember, that was some of the concern of the High Priests and Roman Soldiers during Jesus' final week as he entered the city. The Jewish crowds were huge: thousands of pilgrims coming to the temple in Jerusalem for this celebration of what Moses had done several thousand years earlier to free the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt.

Even today at the end of the Passover Feast, eaten around the world, each year, the final statement of the liturgy says "Next year, Jerusalem!" At some point in life we all want to go home; to the place of better days and better memories. Home, the place we hope to find peace. Though we may know we cannot stay there forever, we seek celebration, reunion, sanctuary and solace there, for a time.

At Christmas time, the time we celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Savior, many make the pilgrimage home. Then we come to church on Christmas Eve to seek our home in God. We look for a moment of peace for our lives. We seek a place where we can 'belong' and 'fit in' with the multitude. Then at some point in the service, candles are lit and we sing together about the night of Jesus' birth.

Would you sing with me now the first verse of Silent Night? *"Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright Round yon virgin mother and Child. Holy Infant, so tender and mild, Sleep in heavenly peace, Sleep in heavenly peace."* That was really nice. Don't despair, Christmas decorations will start arriving on the store shelves, right after the school supplies are gone and it is only 135 days until Christmas!

One more! Please turn to the screen or in the hymnal to #850 and let's read responsively together Psalm 133.

¹ Behold, how good and pleasant it is when we live together in unity!

²**It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!**

³It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!

For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life for evermore.

A little explanation: Aaron was, like all of us are, anointed or blessed with gifts and abilities to serve God and the world. Like the oil running down, we have to allow the blessings to grow in us over time until they cover us and unite us with others. The dew on Mount Hermon allowed it to flourish and be fruitful, just like we are called to be, as we unite with others in our lives.

Unity is precious like the blessings God is growing in all of us, but we have to seek them out where God has blessed us and unite those blessings with the blessings of others as we move closer to Zion. Psalm 133 has only three verses, which if you are into numerology is the perfect number, the number of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To the writer of this psalm, the answer we ascend to is in our shared gifts for unity.

Because my mother had some complicating health issues I asked her to work on her funeral planner by picking out some hymns for her funeral ahead of time. I took her a copy of the UM hymnal and The Faith We Sing, knowing that she loved both the old and the newer hymns. She picked out about 25 of them. I assured her we would sing as many as we could fit into the service when the time came, and we did...

Because we never know when we will go 'on to final glory' with God, I encourage all of you to think about how you want the people you love to celebrate your life after you are gone. I have a funeral planner that I would be glad to share, if anyone wants some guidance with this. As for me, I have chosen these hymns: 'Blessed Assurance' – so everyone present knows where my faith comes from; 'I Love to Tell the Story' – In hopes that I did that well in my life; and 'They'll Know We are Christians by our Love' – As I want to celebrate our work together as Christians.

Because my mother shared through the years her love for the hymns, I also love many of the hymns, so that list might still change during the rest of my life. But the one song I want everyone to sing at my funeral, a celebration of our unity, along with the joy of reunion, is 'When We All Get To Heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be...' It is marked as such in my hymnal 'To be sung at my funeral.' That day I hope it will say to all who sing: "I have made it! And some day you will join me."

God is so good to give us enough time for our anointing to sink in. Along the journey we sing our way to wholeness. Can you see the thousands of Hebrew people, together singing their way out of Egypt, singing their way to Jerusalem, singing our way to Heaven. Thank God for the Songs!