

# **First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan**

## ***Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 121, A Psalm of Ascent***

### ***“Assurance of God’s Protection”***

**Sunday, September 6, 2020**

**Rev. Emily Campbell**

#### **Rev. Emily Campbell – Greeting and Announcements**

Friends, good morning! Welcome to worship. Today is Sunday September 6<sup>th</sup>, and my name is the Reverend Emily Campbell. Thank you for joining us this Labor Day weekend. We pray that your weekend is full of rest and peace.

Friends, as we get going today, I do need to tell you that here in Plymouth, MI where we are located, the Covid stats continue to rise. With that fact in mind, our church session met this past week and made the determination that we would wait to reintroduce live services until that time when, within Michigan, it's safe for at least 50 people to be together in one space. So for now we remain online, but we are doing everything we can as a church to make the services creative and relevant to where we are today. We are also trying to provide as much in-person fellowship safely as we can. To that end, we had a great fellowship event this past Friday, together. And every Friday in September between 10:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m., there is an opportunity to come and join in live fellowship outside in our church parking lot. If you are frustrated because you are working and are unable to be a part of these Friday events, we also want to have an opportunity for you. On Saturday, September 19<sup>th</sup>, this time from 12:00 to 2:00 p.m., that same fellowship opportunity will be available here at the church. We will also be handing out those items we handed out this past Friday, so a devotional, the Psalm prayer card and ice cream sandwiches-- all of those are here on offer on Saturday September 19<sup>th</sup>. If you missed that first date, come and join us then.

Friends, in the days and weeks ahead we will soon--on our church website--have all the information laid out very clearly of all our upcoming Bible studies, book discussions, and our committee meetings. Life in the church remains very active, even as we meet each other online.

I do once again ask for your help. We are still trying to compile a list of teachers who are connected to our congregation as members or as friends of this congregation. We're looking for active teachers, not necessarily Sunday school teachers, but teachers in the community, paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, or administrators. If you can list those names on our church website on the teacher tab we would be most appreciative, as we have something special planned for them in the near future.

Friends, today is a special day in the life of our church. As it is the first Sunday of the month we are celebrating communion together and we look forward to that reminder from God that we are one family of faith, from wherever we are gathering today. There will be a chance later in the service to gather communion elements from your home. Whatever you have available—bread, juice will work, and we look forward to sharing in this very special time of fellowship together. Let us now prepare our hearts for worship.

#### **Rev. Mark Hovermale - Opening Prayer**

Let us pray. Lord, we praise you for *all* your blessings, not just for being alive and getting to be your church, especially in times like these. We praise you, for you are indeed just and worthy of praise, and our prayer is that this service brings you honor and glory and a smile to your face. We know we have messed up this week, we have made some mistakes, we have done and thought things we should not have. And there are some things we should have done that we did not do. We take a moment and we confess these to you and ask your forgiveness. We know we can ask this forgiveness with confidence, as you show us grace and mercy every day. In your name we pray. Amen.

## **Rev. Hovermale - Scripture Reading, Psalm 121, A Song of Ascents (NIV)**

- <sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the mountains—  
where does my help come from?
- <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.
- <sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot slip—  
he who watches over you will not slumber;
- <sup>4</sup> indeed, he who watches over Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.
- <sup>5</sup> The LORD watches over you—  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
- <sup>6</sup> the sun will not harm you by day,  
nor the moon by night.
- <sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all harm—  
he will watch over your life;
- <sup>8</sup> the LORD will watch over your coming and going  
both now and forevermore.

## **Rev. Campbell - Sermon**

Will you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, we thank you today for the gift of your presence and your promises and your peace. We pray that we would lean into all of these things as we seek to know your will. Speak to us from your spirit, we pray, and draw us all closer to you. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Friends, a long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I was a Girl Scout! I was a Girl Scout, actually, for almost all of my elementary years. I wasn't just a Girl Scout; my mother was actually my troop leader. As any good scout knows, one of the main activities you do in scouting is you work to earn badges. Earning badges is certainly something I engaged in while I was a scout. One particular activity I remember doing, in order to earn a badge was a fitness activity that the entire troop had to do. We had to complete an extended walk together to earn this certain fitness badge.

Some of you already know that I grew up in Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh is the second hilliest city in the United States, after San Francisco. This meant an extended walk was mostly uphill. On this walk, which as a young person, probably about 10 years old, felt like 10 miles, but was actually probably closer to a mile or two, we were going completely uphill the entire time. I remember our troop of close to 20 girls. My mother was at the front as the troop leader; there was another troop leader in the back, and there were other adult parents in between. As we went up this hill, I remember we started quickly and by about one-quarter of the way up, our pace slowed a little bit. We kept climbing and we kept climbing and we got about halfway up to our destination and I remember, it was at this point, that I heard someone say, "Mrs. Riley, Mrs. Riley, I can't make it"! Sure enough, there was one of the girls in our troop, Deneen. She was doubled over, and she said that she was "done". All of a sudden, wherever we were on the road, whether we were ahead of her, or behind her, or next to her, we all came around Deneen. We all took a short break, had a drink from our water bottles, and then we proceeded to just offer encouragement and help. I remember saying to Deneen, "You can do it, you can do it, one step more". That's how we took the entire rest of the journey uphill, one step more, one step more, and the greatest thing about that is when we reached the top, what I learned from that experience so long ago was that the joy I knew had nothing to do with the fact that I had reached the goal or I had earned a badge. The joy and wisdom I gained from that experience is that the entire troupe made it, and together we had this celebration of friendship and fellowship. That clearly I have never forgotten.

Friends, today in so many ways I feel like we are like a troop of scouts climbing up this Covid hill. We started off strong with a lot of energy and all moving. About what we deemed to be maybe one quarter of the way through, which we don't know if it's *even* one quarter of the way through, our pace slowed. We found ourselves getting a little more winded, a little more tired, and halfway through, or what we may think is halfway through, I think some of us really were ready to give up. Some said, "I'm fed up! I cannot see the top. I have no idea how long this is going to go and I don't know if I can make it." Certainly as we focus our attention day-by-day on the news and as we hear about rising Covid stats or stories in the news of people who have been sick or lost their battle, as we focus on what's wrong, it's easy to grow in anxiety and worry and to feel as if we are that hiker who's just not going to make it to the top.

I think in those times what most of us do when we're feeling overwhelmed is we look outside of ourselves for comfort. But in today's world where there are so many options for us to have instant communication, where we look for comfort varies for each of us. Some of us may turn to social media and for the fellowship we find there. Some of us may turn to just speaking with our family members or certain friends. Some of us may turn to Netflix or the wide variety of TV shows on offer for us. We turn and look for comfort in food and in drink and in all other types of places. Some of those choices are healthy and some of those choices are healthy in moderation, and then some of those choices aren't healthy at all. The reality of it is that we still find ourselves lacking that deep peace that comes from only a place outside of all of these other pursuits. It's when we cannot find peace elsewhere that we find ourselves finally turning and looking to God. We look up instead of looking out and certainly that is the call of Psalm 121.

God calls us to look up for our help and care and deliverance. That Psalm begins, "I lift my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from? My help comes from the maker of heaven and earth." This description of God is actually the very same description of God that starts the Apostles' Creed. You know the words found there: "I believe in God almighty, the maker of heaven and earth." This is the same God, scripture tells us, in Isaiah, chapter 40 at verse 26. There we find,

"Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens.  
Who created all these?  
He who brings out the starry host one by one  
and calls forth each of them by name.  
Because of his great power and mighty strength  
not one of them is missing."

This great creator God who made the hills, the mountains, the starry skies and galaxy! That great God desires to be our protector, our keeper, our watchman and comfort. The Psalm that begins with the call to look to God ends with the words, "The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life. The Lord will watch over your coming and your going, both now and forever more."

We do not need to be anxious or afraid or worried because God is making himself available to us! God desires to be with us in all of our journeys, and God is most certainly for us. God desires to help us, offering as it says in Psalm 121 at verse 5, "shade from the heat of life's trials". We will know comfort; we will know refreshment. God desires to guide us, offering us, as it says in verse 3, sure footing when the road ahead is rocky. God desires to provide us with comfort and protection from the trials of day and the trials of night. As it says in verse 6, when it talks about the sun and the moon, God does not fall asleep on the job. He is always faithful, always available to us, offering us his spiritual and emotional refreshment time and time again.

Friends, there is a contemporary worship song out right now by Elevation Worship that I think captures so well the meaning and the truth behind this particular Psalm. This worship song is called "The Blessing" and it actually is a compilation of blessings found in the Bible. One of the blessings in the song is the blessing God is offering his people today through Psalm 121. Listen to these words the song repeats:

“May God's presence go before you and behind you,  
and beside you and all around you, and within you.  
He is with you.

He is with you in the morning, in the evening,  
in your coming and in your going,  
in your weeping and in your rejoicing.

He is for you. He is for you!”

God is truly for us today, just as God was with the earliest pilgrims who received this Psalm of blessing.

Friends, this Psalm speaks to the truth that God truly is with us, and for us, not only through this global pandemic but in every trial in life. Just as God sent a troop of Girl Scouts to surround Deneen, and to help her, encourage her, to help her complete her climb, I believe even today God sends help to us to help us complete our trials as we walk through this pandemic and any other trials in life. At times, God calls us to receive that help, and at other times God desires to bless others through us as we serve as a help to others.

Friends, as a church, one thing I know is we will celebrate just as our Girl Scout troop did, when we make it to the top of *this* hill, when we get through this pandemic, and we can join back in fellowship together. We will celebrate, but I also know that that celebration will be nothing compared to the celebration we will one day know when we reach our ultimate destination, the end of our spiritual journey, our heavenly home. There, with God and the company of God's people, the celebration knows no end!

Thanks be to God, who is for us, and with us in every step of our journey, until we arrive safely at home. Amen.

### **Rev. Campbell - Sacrament of Communion**

Friends, we come to this table today because we love God a little and wish to love God more. Come and hear these words said by Jesus Christ: “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Let us now take a minute within our own homes and gather our communion elements and a bit of bread or cracker will work, and whatever you can use or find for the cup. Come, let's get these elements together as we worship God together and while we gather, Jerry and Sharon Smith are here and they're going to help us in our preparations by preparing our hearts for worship with this song of praise, a piano duet of “Crown Him With Many Crowns”.

### **Great Prayer of Thanksgiving**

Gracious God, as your people, we wish to love you with the whole of our heart, soul, mind and strength. But we confess at times that we are distracted people, diverted by other plans. We lose our way and lose sight of you, dear God. Help us, we pray, to return into your presence again. We pray that your grace would be poured out this day upon anyone who is feeling lost or alone, anyone who knows fear. We thank you, dear God, that you, indeed, are our shepherd, our guide and keeper throughout the whole of our lives. We thank you that you know our coming and going and that you guide us always. In the midst of so much change in our world, we are reminded that you are the one thing that remains. We pray for anyone who finds themselves in need this day, but especially we pray for those whose health needs are great at this time. We ask, dear God, that you would bring healing and help and hope. We pray, as well, for their peace. We ask your blessing and strength to be poured out upon everyone who cares for those who are sick. Bless them, we pray, with strength beyond measure. Fill them with your patience and peace and extra resources of love. Gracious God, we also remember at this time our teachers, our parents, and students of every age who seek to come into this new year of learning with new ways and with new challenges. In this unusual time, help them to lean into you for their peace and help and hope. Guide us, dear God, to be your faithful people today, even as you are faithful to us. We

pray, as well, today for anyone who grieves the loss of loved ones. Lord, bless them with resurrection hope, we pray. We lift up our world, recognizing the huge challenges that come with this pandemic, with political elections on the horizon, and with civil unrest. In your mercy, Lord, bring healing and help and justice, and may peace come to the storms of this world and the storms of our lives, we pray. We thank you for bringing us together today as one family of faith around this communion table. We thank you for providing these visible signs of your invisible love and grace. May we live into the hope, the grace, the love, and the peace that is on offer here today. All of this, we ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ, your Son, who taught us when we pray together to say, Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

### **Communion**

Friends, on the night of his arrest, our Lord Jesus took bread and after he had given thanks to God he broke it, saying “This is my body that is broken for you. Do this in memory of me.” In the same way, after supper, Jesus took the cup and after he gave thanks to God his father, he said, “This is the cup of the new covenant that is sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink from it, do so remembering me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.”

Friends, these are the gifts of God, given for the people of God. Let us share this communion meal together at this time.

### **Prayer, Benediction and Blessing**

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for the spiritual refreshment that we find here at your table, for these beautiful reminders of your love and grace at work in our lives and in your world. We give you thanks and praise, we ask that your spirit would continue to minister to our hearts and minds so that we may live into the peace and love and hope that is offered to us here today. Please guide us, dear God, as we go our separate ways this morning. Help us to live into your holy purposes by the power of your spirit at work. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your son. Amen.

Friends, let us go now from here today, remembering where it is that our help does come from. Our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, who will guide our going out and coming in, this day and forever more. Let us go from here praising his name and may the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forevermore. Amen.