

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

## ***Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 133, A Psalm of Ascent***

**Sunday, August 2, 2020**  
**Rev. Emily Campbell**

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### **Announcement, Opening Prayer and A Look at Today's Theme**

Friends, good morning! Welcome to worship at First Presbyterian. We are glad you are joining us from wherever you are today. It is a blessing to have you worship with us. Friends, there's little doubt that we are living in a time of immense change, both within our state and within our country and world, and as we navigate all of these changes each week, we as a church are committed to keeping you safe. To this end, our Covid task force here at the church monitors the virus and its spread within our own community and state. We believe at this time, given the increased spread of the virus, that the best way for us to love our neighbor is to make that decision whether we are going to hold live worship services in the month of August on each Friday of that week. In this way we recognize that change is coming very quickly, and we may need to pivot on short notice. We encourage you to carry on in the practice of pre-registering for services, either through our church's website or by calling the church directly at 734-453-6464, Ext. 115. You can pre-register the Monday prior to any Sunday and if, by chance, our session or our Covid task force makes the decision to cancel a worship service, we will notify everyone directly who has pre-registered for that service.

Friends, we ask you to please be patient with us through this process. We invite you, with us, to lean into God for extra resources of hope and strength and grace. Remember that although everything in our church and world seems to be changing, the God whom we worship never changes. God's presence and faithfulness remains the same as does God's great love for you.

With this in mind, let us now lean into the warm presence of God as we turn to God in prayer.

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious God, we travel with you, not knowing where the road will lead us, but we thank you and praise you that we never would travel any path or road alone. We lift our praise to you today, dear God, for your generous gift of life. We praise you for every blessing we know and experience in this life. We praise you for the blessing of our family members and friends and for the blessing of our church family in these uncertain times. Forgive us as we so quickly move from faith to doubt from hope to despair from kindness to suspicion. Please renew our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit. May we be renewed in faith as we draw close to you now. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

Friends, today in church we are carrying on in our sermon series entitled "Summer in the Psalms", and each week we're looking at a different psalm that offers us insight into the way God's people in the past have related to God and brought every emotion under the sun before God, asking for help guidance and direction. Today, our focus is on Psalm 133 and Psalm 133 falls within a group of psalms that are entitled the Psalms of the Ascent. The Psalms of Ascent, there are fifteen of them in all, a collection that ranges from Psalm 120 to 135. Within that grouping these are the songs that the pilgrims of God used to recite and sing to each other as they made the trip three times a year to Jerusalem for the observation of religious festivals. The psalms were sung as encouragement to each other in faith. They were an encouragement to keep moving in their walk, especially through difficult times, but they were also an encouragement to keep your focus on God as you travel. Friends I cannot think of better psalms for us at this point as we are walking, ourselves, through a pandemic than to focus on these Psalms of Ascent that encourage us to pray as we walk. I pray, as we turn our attention to Psalm 133, we find there the valuable lessons God has to teach us about unity and the blessing that comes from walking together,

## Scripture Lesson: Psalm 133

*A song of ascents. Of David.*

<sup>1</sup> How good and pleasant it is  
when God's people live together in unity!

<sup>2</sup> It is like precious oil poured on the head,  
running down on the beard,  
running down on Aaron's beard,  
down on the collar of his robe.

<sup>3</sup> It is as if the dew of Hermon  
were falling on Mount Zion.  
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,  
even life forevermore.

### Rev. Emily Campbell

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Friends, this morning I'm going to invite you to play "Name That Tune" with me. I'm not going to play you a piece of music and I'm certainly not going to sing for you, but I am going to read to you some lyrics and I wonder how quickly you'll figure out what song this is.

"Making your way in the world today  
Takes everything you got  
Taking a break from all your worries  
It sure would help a lot  
Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go  
Where everybody knows your name  
And they're always glad you came  
You want to be where you can see  
The troubles are all the same  
You want to be where everybody knows your name"

Now that would be a wonderful song to be about the church! Those of you who are probably mid-40s, or older, probably recognize the lyrics of that song as being the theme song from the TV sitcom, "Cheers". That show launched the careers of many people: Ted Danson, Kelsey Grammar, Woody Harrelson. The words of that song are so poignant and remind us so well that we all crave community, we are all searching for that bond, that place, where people know us and accept us exactly as we are. Increasingly, we are craving this, not just because of this pandemic but even prior to this pandemic.

Philip Slater is a leading sociologist. He spent his entire life studying the subject of our isolation and the loneliness it produces. He argued that simply the rise in the number of private homes, private cars, private yards, private amenities keep us from each other, and all of that produces loneliness. Now you add a global pandemic on top of that and the effects of loneliness are staggering. Thankfully, Psalm 133, the psalm that we are studying today, precisely addresses this issue of loneliness. In its opening verse it gives us the remedy for loneliness. It says there, "How good and pleasant it is when people live together in unity". This is a bold invitation to a life of blessing, it is a life lived in community, a life centered around the person of Jesus Christ. This is a community where the needs of others are ranked in equal importance to our own needs. This community focuses on that word "unity", recognizing that it is an invaluable part of the word "community". We focus on the subject of unity today as we look at this psalm, recognizing that the

call of God is to live life in community. Within community we encourage each other, we help one another. And, certainly, as I shared earlier today in the opening of the theme of our sermon series, I talked about how this particular psalm, which is a psalm sung by pilgrims traveling on a journey towards Jerusalem, towards a destination of a place of worship, and this psalm was used to encourage and inspire and to deepen the faith of those on a long journey. We would do well to take these words upon ourselves as we recognize that, even today, they offer encouragement and support and focus our thoughts on God as we travel through life.

The unity of the pilgrims is described in verse two of that psalm, “as precious oil poured on the head, running down Aaron's beard and the collar of his robe”. This was a phrase of both blessing and abundance. It talks about that God gives us more than we could possibly need or want, that blessing of unity--it's so much so that it pours over our shoulders, on to our clothes. Although these phrases about Aaron may not make a lot of sense to us at first, to those early followers of God, these were powerful statements about God's blessing. The image of oil being poured on the head actually comes from Exodus, chapter 29. There we find instructions given for the ordination of Aaron and other priests. After sacrifices were prepared Aaron was dressed in the priestly garments and the direction was given to Aaron's brother Moses by God. God said take the anointing oil and anoint Aaron by pouring it on his head and in this way you shall ordain not only Aaron but his sons. Throughout scripture, oil is this sign of God's holy presence, a symbol of the spirit of God. So in our passage where the oil is not only put on Aaron's head, but it is put on so generously that it runs off his head into his beard, onto the collar of his robe, it means that each person within that tradition, who is part of that community, is marked, as of themselves, as a priest.

Living together means that we try to see each other as anointed priests or ministers for God. We minister one to another and when we're able to focus on this image we better understand this higher calling that God has given to each of us. We look at people differently because they too are anointed priests of God. We treat each other differently because we have been anointed to live into this gift of community. It must have been a joy and great source of encouragement for those early pilgrims to be able to see each other in this way, and it's our calling to follow in their footsteps today in the way that we see each other, in the way that we treat each other.

Certainly, the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood this truth. He lived his life around this particular Psalm 133. Psalm 133 was the basis for his book, “Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian in Community”. In that book he writes we are set apart for service, one to another; we are priests who speak God's word and we share Christ's sacrifice.

It's not just Dietrich Bonhoeffer who reminds us of this truth. Throughout the whole of scripture, we are called to recognize this truth again and again. There are actually 50 different commands found in scripture about what life looks like as we follow in community. These commands are known as the “One Another” passages. There are 50 different phrases regarding how we're supposed to treat one another within scripture. We're told we are to pray for one another, encourage one another, bear each other's burdens, confess to one another. We are called to be patient with each other, be devoted to each other, honor one another, live in harmony with one another, greet one another, and more than fifteen different times we are told to love one another. God obviously had this idea of community in mind from the very beginning and here emphasizes it again and again in these “One Another” passages.

We're told that when we honor one another in this way our community becomes, “like the dew of Hermon which falls on Mount Zion. Mount Hermon stands over 9000 feet in elevation, being the tallest mountain in that region of Syria Palestine. Its dew would create so much water in a particular region it would water all the crops in late summer, and it would nourish them into maturity. The fact that the dew of Hermon would fall on the Mount of Zion indicates what a miraculous blessing this was. This was *not* a feat that would have happened naturally. It only happened because of God!

So it is with our community. By nature, we may not have come together, yet because of God, in God, we come together as one family! Scripture seems to know nothing about the role of a solitary Christian. Throughout the Bible, God never works with individuals in isolation but always with people in community. Remember Jesus himself worked with twelve disciples and lived with them in community. The church was formed when 120 people were all together in one place. And when

Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he said, "Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength". Immediately, before anyone could run off and do those things by themselves, Jesus said, "And remember to love your neighbor as yourself".

Friends, as we come together in worship, even though we are physically apart from one another due to this virus, we are still one community of faith. We still know the blessing of having God's spirit unite us. We know the blessing and abundance of God's spirit at work in our midst as we pray for one another, as we support one another, as we encourage one another, and as we love one another. The role that we are called to play as priest to one another has not gone away just because we cannot meet in the church building. That role continues, even today, and by God's grace we are gifted with God's spirit to help us in that role. I pray today each of us would be more open to the spirit of God at work and we would reach out within our own community of faith, be it our family, or extended family, or extended church family, and share the love of Christ with others, even as that love is shared with us. Thanks be to God for his blessed gift of community. May we forever live into its blessings. Amen.

### **Dr. Jerry Smith**

Let us pray. Father, we have gathered once again. Though in separate homes, we are in unity through your Holy Spirit. Although this pandemic has made many of us to be anxious and has kept many of us in uncertainty, our prayer would ask that we be reminded of your power and of your strength. In many ways we have forgotten your promises, promises for safety and for protection. These promises found in Psalm 91, "You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday". . . "For He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways". Father, we pray not only for this protection and this safety, but for your help. We pray, particularly for those who have lost family members, especially those in recent days, for those who have lost their jobs due to this pandemic, for those who have become disillusioned because of the world situation and the political climate. We pray for our neighbors, for our church family, for those in leadership, for those who are in greatest need. Help us not to live in fear but to live, always providing comfort and love to those in need. Finally, we would not forget to acknowledge our personal and collective blessings we enjoy every day. Thank you, Father for your grace, and for your mercy you give to us so freely. Now please hear us as we pray together the prayer you taught your disciples so long ago,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your 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.

### **Rev. Emily Campbell**

Friends let us go from here rejoicing in God's gift of unity and God's gift of blessing. Let us go from here relying on the strength and grace of God, and as we go may the blessing of God almighty Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rest on you and on all those whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.