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The Climb of Your Life: The Decision Psalm 120

Welcome to Back Home Sunday! I hope you had a wonderful summer. We did, although things didn't exactly slow down around here while we were gone... guest speakers and Hot Topics and 41 baptisms and Jubilee in the Park. People were surprised to see us here on a Sunday or Monday when they knew we were on vacation. The answer is easy: we love our sweetheart church. We don't want to worship anywhere else... and we don't want to miss out on the fun.

Although I have to admit, I wondered if **this** year, things went a little **too** smoothly in my absence. The first early morning I tried to get into the building, I found my key didn't work, my key card didn't work and my password had been changed. I went back home and sent an email to my assistant, Kathy: "When you get in this morning, would you mind looking to see whose name is on the outside of my office door?"

It was mine! Yeah. So, I'm grateful to still have a job and for our wonderful team of leaders and for rest and study leave. And now, I'm eager to start our 27th year together with a new sermon series, *The Climb of Your Life*. This fall we will be journeying through the "Psalms of Ascent." What are those, you ask?

In the middle of our Bible is a collection of ancient Hebrew songs. They were written over several hundreds of years; many of them by King David. These songs contain some of the best-loved scripture passages. Who hasn't heard, "The Lord is my shepherd...?"

Those 150 songs are called The Psalms, or the Psalter. But did you know that there is a mini-psalter? A psalter within the psalter? Fifteen of them... beginning with Psalm 120. We know they are a special collection because each one has the same subtitle: "A Psalm of Ascent." What does that mean? What were they climbing to?

First of all, it meant "ascent to Jerusalem." Jerusalem sits on a hill. No matter how you approach it, you must go up. To this day, Jews speak of going "up" to Jerusalem. Three times a year—during the holy festivals of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles—hundreds of thousands of Jews journeyed up to Jerusalem. And as they traveled together, they sang these songs... songs of ascent. Songs for going up.

But it wasn't just elevation. It was veneration. The temple was the center of Jewish life. A high point of every trip I lead to Jerusalem is at the ancient stairway leading up to the Temple Mount; steps that Jesus would have used. The steps are of two shapes. Narrow, wide, narrow, wide. As the pilgrims approached the Temple, they would pause on every wide step and sing one of the Psalms of Ascent. Then, step, step... and sing another. Step, step... and another. All the way up to the Temple.

There's one more thing to know about the Psalms of Ascent. Many of them were written while the people of Israel were in exile. In 586, Jerusalem was overrun by the Babylonians and most of the nation carried off into exile; to a far place utterly foreign to them. Their hearts were broken, and while they were there they wrote songs like these... yearning to return home.

Seventy years later, when they were allowed to go home, they sang these songs on their journey. Can you imagine the joy and the tears mingled as they finally returned after decades in captivity? Finally saw their beloved city? Finally approached the steps to their temple... and to their encounter with God?

The Psalms of Ascent are about a journey from a place of exile into the presence of the Living God. These are songs of the journey of life—and not just for ancient Jews—for us today. Every one of these psalms speaks to where we are right now... to our longing for something more, our longing to be in the presence of God. So this is *The Climb of Your Life*. And to start this morning, I need about twenty of you to join me up on these stony temple steps... to lead us as we read, together, our first Psalm of Ascent. (Be careful not to trip! It will then be the fall of your life.)

¹I call on the LORD in my distress, and he answers me. (*Step*)

²Save me, O LORD, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues. (*Step*)

³What will he do to you, and what more besides, O deceitful tongue? (*Step*)

⁴He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom tree. (*Step*)

⁵Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar! (*Step*)

⁶Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. (*Step*)

⁷I am a man of peace; but when I speak, they are for war. (*Step*)

Now you've got to admit, if you were sitting in the back hump of your family camel, starting out on a journey and dad said, "Let's sing," you'd probably go for something a little more peppy, wouldn't you—*Row, Row, Row Your Ark, 99 Bottles of Wine on the Wall*—something fun? So, what do you think of this starting point for the Psalms of Ascent? It's kind of a downer, isn't it? "I call on the Lord in my distress." The psalmist asks God to save him from the mean people he lives with. He complains that he has to live in Meshech, in the tents of Kedar. Really, it's kind of a buzz kill. Couldn't the first Psalm of Ascent be happier?

“Ya-hoo’ I get to go to Jeru-sa-lem; Huzzah’ it’s gonna be such a lot of fun!”

Something like that? No... no, that’s a psalm for vacation. Not for pilgrimage. Think about it... what is usually required for someone to pack up house, pull up roots and go someplace new? What is necessary for such an uprooting? Discontent! A growing discontent with your present circumstances that causes you, finally, to say, “I’ve had it! I don’t want to be here anymore. I want to go somewhere else. Someplace new.”

Do you hear the discontent in the psalmist’s words? He sings of distress. He cries out to the Lord about the people that surround him; the culture that entraps him... a culture of deceit where people’s lies cut and scar. (Have any of you ever been there... ever been on the receiving end of slander? I have. It’s awful, isn’t it?) And he cries out against the culture of violence. Of course, we know nothing of that, do we? ...a World War II vet beaten to death by teenagers ...Newark, New Jersey where they have had ten murders in ten days ...possible war in Syria.

Lies and violence? Yes, we understand! The psalmist longs to be in a place where God’s justice prevails... where slanderers are silenced, where bullies are brought to heel and brought to justice, where the innocent are vindicated and the meek protected. He longs for Jerusalem, but he’s stuck in Meshech.

Probably not literally, though. Meshech was in modern day Turkey, hundreds of miles north. Kedar was on the Arabian Peninsula, hundreds of miles south. It is doubtful he lived in both places. This was his poetic way of describing the huge Gentile world into which the Jews had been cast. It is any place away from Jerusalem—as far from peace and justice as he can describe. If you look on a map with Jerusalem, Meshech and Kedar highlighted and you find Jerusalem, he’s saying, “There... there is where I want to be. But up here, or down here, is where I am stuck. And I hate here.”

How many of you hate your “here” or hate some part of your “here?” You don’t like where your marriage is, don’t like where your career is, don’t like where your children are, don’t like where your health is, don’t like where your reputation is... don’t like a thing about your future. You feel stuck here. In Meshech. In Kedar. Either up here or down here but certainly not there... there where you long to be. You are discontented.

Great! That is the beginning of your journey to a new place... the start of your ascent. But being discontented is not enough. You must **decide** to do something about it. When you are stuck in Meshech and long for Jerusalem, you must decide that you are heading the wrong way and have the courage to reverse course.

One summer we were in Iowa for a family reunion. There was a bunch of us and we were caravanning. At one point we noticed that Cyndi’s sister Connie was not

behind us. As I drove, Cyndi called to check on her. I heard only half the conversation, but it went something like this: "Where are you guys? What mile marker are you at? Do you see any road signs? You are going the wrong way. No, Connie, you are going the wrong way. Connie, you are headed in the opposite direction... Connie... you need to stop, turn around and go the other way!"

Connie was angry and embarrassed. No one likes to discover they are heading in the exactly wrong direction. You want to argue. You want to justify. You want to convince yourself that the wrong way is the right way, but at some point, you must set aside your anger and embarrassment and do the only thing you can do: Stop, turn around, and go the other way!

The Bible has a word for this. Do you know what it is? Repentance! The Greek word, metanoia means, literally, to turn around and go the other direction... to do a U-turn. We think of repentance as something we do once. The other night during our baptisms, we expected the Holy Spirit to stir the hearts of the people gathered. So, elders were stationed on the beach to listen to the confession of those who felt called to be baptized. That confession was simply this: I repent of my sins and I trust Jesus for my new life. I repent—I stop, turn around, and go the other way—and I trust. 41 people, many in street clothes, were baptized that night.

But repentance is not just "one and done." Our whole lives are one act of repentance after another. I told our team the other day, I feel like a serial repenter. Again and again I come to the same place where I say to God, "I'm sorry," and stop, turn around, and go the other way... often over the same issue; some sin that has its claws in me.

For instance, I serially repent of my sin of worry. Despite 56 years of God's faithfulness, I am still convinced that only my anxiety will keep the kingdom of God moving forward. The other day someone said to me, "The Lord is so capable." I like that. God is so capable. Yet every time I worry, it is a confession that I don't really believe God is capable. So, what do I need to do... every time? Repent, sinner! Stop again. Turn around again. Go the other way again.

Worry is my Meshech; Anxiety my Kedar. I have others. But Worry, for me, is that far-off place I despise. I recognize it for the contemptible lack of faith it represents, but too often I still like to cuddle up to my old familiar sin when what is required is repentance. One more time: stop, turn around and go the other way.

I want to go up. I want to climb up in life. I want to make my place in the heights. I have climbed Mt. Rainier and Half Dome and Pinnacle Peak... The heights thrill me: the view, the air, the accomplishment, the camaraderie... I am exhilarated by them.

Our life in Christ is a climb, but it is also a series of U-turns because you can't climb up until you stop climbing down. It starts with that first U-turn where we admit that apart from Jesus we are hopelessly lost. But after He has saved us—after his Holy Spirit lives in us—our lives are still a continual climb in which we reject the depths and turn toward the heights. You cannot go up until you stop going down. You need to hate Meshech enough to say, "I cannot stay here any longer! I need to stop, turn around and go the other way!"

In a way, this is more a Psalm of Descent than it is a Psalm of Ascent. It starts with us going down and then calls for us to go up. It is the perfect starting point. Because until we have enough discontent to repent of Meshech and its pointless, wearying toil, we will never have the courage to turn around and go the other way... to begin our climb of life.

There are many here this morning stuck in Meshech. Your marriage is Meshech... you are miserable, your wife is miserable, but the thought of counseling or of going to Men's Life to be a different kind of man... you won't consider it. What do you expect your future to look like other than more of your past? You need discontent. You need to decide to stop, turn around and go the other way!

Maybe school is Meshech. You can already feel the tug of friends who want you to lie to your parents and behave in a way that dishonors you, your family, and most of all, your Lord. You need to decide to stop, turn around and go the other way!

Maybe alcohol is your Meshech... or consumerism, or careerism, or porn, or gossip, or depression. You hate where you are, but are you discontented enough to ask God to give you the strength to stop, turn around and go the other way?

Last week we were in Salt Lake City for Jessie Eriksson's wedding. I saw a billboard for a health center that said, "Nothing changes if nothing changes." What needs to change in your life? Are you living in Meshech... miserable and directionless? Nothing changes if nothing changes. You can never go up until you stop going down. Now is your moment to repent: to stop, turn around and go the other way. Jesus made it possible on his cross. He has been to Meshech and back. Are you ready to follow Him to the heights?

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. What does "Psalm of Ascent" refer to? Where are they? How many of them?
 2. The author complains of people with lying lips who slander him. Can you share one of your worst experiences of slander? What is the lie that you continue to tell about yourself?
 3. Meshech and Kedar represent far places that need to be left behind. What is Meshech in your life and what would it mean to turn around (repent) and go in a different direction? What is stopping you?