



*Jubilee Celebration Sunday
November 17, 2013
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The Climb of Your Life: The Legacy Psalm 128

So... I was at home Thursday morning, typing away on this sermon, reminiscing about the purchase of this land and the construction of our first sanctuary, when I received this text from Pastor Megan: "*There's a fire in Memorial Chapel!*" I rushed to the church to discover the building surrounded by fire trucks, lights flashing, hoses hooked to hydrants, water pooling in the parking lot, fire fighters scrambling around on the roof and inside the building. And when I heard about the call requesting a chainsaw, I knew that we were in for some serious redecorating. Thankfully, it was only a furnace fire and the damage was limited, although we do now have a brand new skylight that was cut into our ceiling!

Does it strike you as ironic that this week of all weeks, when we celebrate fifty years of God's faithfulness... this is the week we would have a fire? Really? And for those of you who asked: No, the insurance check was definitely not part of our Jubilee Debt retirement plan.

Obviously, as I drove to the church, I was praying I would not find our chapel in ashes. It is a wonderful part of our heritage. But our legacy is not the building around us. Our legacy is the people inside! And we are here to celebrate that legacy this morning.

I don't know how it worked out perfectly, but exactly fifty years ago, on Sunday November 17, 1963, our church was born. A church-naming competition had been held. Submissions included "Harbor Presbyterian" and "Shepherd of the Hills Presbyterian." But Della Ruth Neel, the Pastor's wife, had an idea. She suggested "Chapel Hill" since the land that had been purchased for the new church sat on a hill at the corner of Rosedale and Skansie. And we all know the power that the First Lady of this church wields, don't we? Della Ruth won. Seventy-five charter members and one hardworking pastor and his family became "Chapel Hill United Presbyterian Church." And fifty years later, we are their legacy. Do you think they ever dreamed of all that God would do?

For the past seven weeks we have been on a journey through the Psalms of Ascent, a sub-section of 15 chapters within the book of Psalms. These were songs sung by pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate the three yearly

festivals: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Those festivals were like the Super Bowl, Mardi Gras and Christmas all rolled into one. The population of Jerusalem swelled by a hundred thousand! Just imagine having a God who says to His people, "Three times a year, I want you to throw a big party to remember how much I love you and what I have done for you!"

But God had another party idea. He called it Jubilee. Every fifty years was the Year of Jubilee. At that time all slaves were set free, all debts forgiven, all land returned to its original owners and the clans would come together for a family reunion. This morning is our Jubilee. We've been "singing" our way through these Psalms of Ascent with this as our destination: a gathering of the Chapel Hill clan, both old and new; a celebration of our freedom in Christ and even a chance to take a whack at some of the debt that weighs us down. We are here to celebrate fifty years of God's faithfulness... and to look ahead to the next fifty years and ask this question: what will be our legacy? Psalm 128 speaks to that.

I don't know if you realize it, but every single Psalm of Ascent we have looked at so far speaks of the perils and struggles of the journey of life. Ps. 120: I don't want to stay here in Meshach; everyone here is violent. Ps. 121: Where does my help come from? This journey is hard! Ps. 122: Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Ps. 123: Have mercy on us for we have had more than enough of contempt. Ps. 124: If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have been swallowed alive! Ps. 125: The scepter of the wicked has been raised over us! Ps. 126: Weeping and sowing; weeping and sowing. Ps. 127: Unless the Lord watches over the city, we are in trouble!

Every single Psalm of Ascent so far declares that the journey "up" is perilous, wearying, fraught with danger. I think that's why these sermons have resonated with us. No one here has to be convinced that life can be hard, right? There are trials and fires and illness and death to be faced along the way. And believers—passionate, devoted, followers of Christ—are not immune, are they? The psalms are so honest. They warn us that the Climb of our Life is tough.

But this morning, this psalm—this wonderful, Jubilee psalm—gives us a glimpse of glory. It answers the question, "Why should I bother? If life is so hard—if even believers struggle in the climb—why bother? Why bother with faith?" Answer? Because those who love God and live life God's way will be better off than those who do not.

That's the promise of verse 1: *Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways.* That word "blessed" is precious. It means "happy." It also means "showered with God's favor." Blessed. This psalm offers a promise to those who struggle in their upward journey toward God: it is worth it! Don't give up! Keep your eyes on the Lord. Because if you do, no matter your present circumstances, God is going to shower you with favor. This life—your life—will be better and, yes, happier, if you fear the Lord and walk in his ways.

Fear. Fear doesn't just mean "terrified" because God is so big and we are so puny... although there is a little bit of that. But "fear" also means to hold God in awe—to see him for who he is, to recognize his greatness and his sufficiency and bow before him! We are to fear the Lord and walk in his ways. In other words, we don't just pay lip service... don't just pretend to be followers of Jesus. We bow before him... we submit our lives to him... we invite him to be both the savior of our broken lives and the Lord of our redeemed lives. Whatever he tells us to do, we do! We walk in his ways!

If we do that—if we fear and honor God, and if we walk in obedience by the power of his Spirit—he is going to bless us! God will shower us with his favor. Life will be better than it would otherwise! Don't you want life to be better? There is nothing wrong with wanting life to be better! Life is God's gift. The good things of life are God's gifts of grace to us. And we see some of them in this psalm: The gift of a job, of good, hard work and the privilege of making a living and of enjoying prosperity... that's a blessing from God! The gift of a great spouse. I love my wife! She is a blessing from God. The gift of children... both of my precious kids are here today. And the gift of a home and a table with food on it... where that family comes together full of vitality and promise and energy.

These are blessings from God! All these things—meaningful labor, prosperity, marriage, family, home, love, security—are the showering of God's favor upon his people. Will life be difficult? Yes! Will some of these pieces be missing at some points in our life? Yes. Is this a magic incantation that means we will never face hardship or disappointment? No! But when we live in the fear of God—when we walk in his ways—it will be better for us! It will be better for the kind than the cruel; better for the truth-teller than the liar; better for the humble than the proud; better for the faithful than the promiscuous; better for the generous than the stingy, better for the faithful than the doubter. All along the way of life, we who fear God and walk in his ways... we will be better off! We will be happier than those who do not. We will be blessed.

But even when things are hard, even when the journey kicks us in the teeth... we will still be better off than the rest of the world because we have a hope that the world does not possess. The hope that is ours in Jesus Christ! In the end, when the dust of our life settles, we who fear the Lord and walk in his ways will be blessed.

And not just in this life. That blessing will be carried forward to a next generation. When we live in obedience before the Lord, we cast blessings forward. Did you see it in the last two verses?

May the LORD bless you from Zion all the days of your life; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem, and may you live to see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel.

Do you hear the promise of legacy there? "...may you live to see your children's children!" This is not just speaking of the longing of every human being to hold their own grandchild... this is the deeper longing to see our grandchildren among the community of the redeemed. Part of Zion, prospering in Jerusalem, living in God's peace—living in God's Church as faithful followers of Jesus! The greatest legacy of God's blessing is that our children and our children's children and our children's children's children come to know and love the Savior and live in His shalom!

We pause today as a church to look backwards. There's nothing wrong with that if we use it as an opportunity to recognize God's faithfulness and thank him for it. But the church that only looks backward is doomed! I have a friend who is pastoring a church... trying to urge them to reach out to the young people who are missing. Her message is: you are going to die if you don't reach the young! Their response: "We've been around for 158 years. How is it possible that we would die?" It is possible. The world is filled with beautiful, empty cathedrals. Every church is only one generation away from extinction. We look backward to rejoice, but we must look forward to live!

This church has always been forward-looking and forward-leaning. Our forebears bought ten acres... a ridiculous amount of land! How could they ever use it all, right? They built a sanctuary that seated 250 people... a ridiculous size for this little community and their 75 member church, right? They sacrificed to pay off the ridiculously high mortgage of—brace yourselves—\$160,000! Extravagant, right? Elders, whose names we see on the screen every St. Andrews Sunday—Edward New, Mel Westrum, Lewis Cruver, Adolf Hoepner, Fred Babbitt—they sacrificed and committed themselves to a future they could not see nor even conceive. And look at this! Look at us! We are their legacy!

I am glad I did not drive up Thursday to find our buildings burned to the ground. It would have been tragic. We value these buildings and how they have served us and this community. But if some night our building does burn to the ground, the next Sunday morning, the Church of Jesus called Chapel Hill will gather upon those ashes and sing together "Great is Thy Faithfulness, O God Our Father!" This is not the church. This is the church—you, all of you, my Sweetheart church!

Fifty years from now, I hope these buildings still stand. But I hope more than that, fifty years from now your children and your grandchildren and your great grandchildren will stand. Will stand for Jesus Christ... will stand for his kingdom... will stand for his righteousness. And yes, I hope our descendants will stand together within these walls to sing praise to the God who blesses his faithful people. And when they do, that will be our greatest legacy!

Praise God from whom all blessings flow these past fifty years.
Praise God from whom all blessings will flow in the fifty years to come!

May we live to see our grandchildren loving God, loving each other, and loving this world, filling this building with the praise of a new generation of faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever and ever. Amen.