

Lord, Help Me

Psalm 124
September 29, 2024

First Presbyterian Church
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Kansas cattle ranchers have learned there's a big difference between the behavior of buffalo and that of cattle when they are confronted with an oncoming storm. Left to themselves, the cattle will panic and try to run away. As the storm overtakes them, many are lost to injuries.

Buffalo, on the other hand, seem to know that the storm must be faced resolutely. They turn in the direction of the storm with their heads downward and walk slowly into the wind. For buffalo on the Great Plains, storm-related injuries and deaths are much less common.

The question for us is, when we are confronted with the storms of life, do we run away only to get overtaken, or do we put our heads down and weather the storm until it breaks, until a sense of calm and peace returns?

And, if some of you here today are like buffalo who weather the storms of life and some are like cattle who try to run away, how can we be sure to follow the right strategy in the face of danger?

Today's Old Testament lesson is all about strategy, about overcoming great challenges, surviving terrible circumstances, and finding courage and a sense of peace even amid our most overwhelming threats and fears.

Psalm 124 refers to a time when the people of God, the ancient Israelites came under attack by outside forces beyond their control. It's speaking of the enemy armies they faced – the Philistines, Moabites and Ammonites. And yet, the survival strategy revealed in this psalm works for anything you might be up against, whether it's financial concerns, medical issues, relationship troubles, family difficulties, or even fears about the future of our nation.

The strategy for life found in Psalm 124 comes from knowing that this is one of 15 Psalm or Song of Ascent, which were sung by worshipers traveling to or taking part in religious gatherings. For instance, some believe they were sung by pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem, or perhaps by the Levite priests as they ascended the 15 steps to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Can you imagine a group of worshipers 1,000 years before Jesus walked the earth joining their voices in singing this Psalm?

“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side – let Israel now say – if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed

us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us....” Singing about having the Lord on our side – it’s kind of like the first hymn we sang this morning: “We sing the mighty power of God..., We sing the wisdom that ordained..., We sing the goodness of the Lord... While all that barrows life from you (o Lord) is ever in your care, and everywhere that we can be, you, God, are present there.”

Why is it important that we sing hymns together in worship? Does it make a difference in your life, in how things go for you in the week ahead? Yes, it makes a big difference for some of us here today maybe not so much for others.

It depends on how much you pay attention to the hymns that we sing, and whether you make an effort to take their meaning with you into the week to come.

When you leave here today, will you take Hymn No. 32 with you, will you take with you the power and wisdom of God, in your heart and soul and mind?

Is the goodness of the Lord that we sang about something you might experience and feel throughout the week?

Do you have a sense that, no matter where this week takes you, you’ll be in the care of the Lord, and that everywhere you go, God will be there with you?

Wow! That is powerful, isn’t it? It’s a powerful way to go through the week when you’re mindful of the wisdom and goodness of God, certain that God goes with you, just as Hymn No. 32 says. But how do we be sure we take that divine power with us?

Well, the ancient Israelites made an effort to relate their knowledge of God, their faith in the Lord Almighty to the events of their lives. “If it had not been for the Lord,” they sang, “then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters.”

Words like flood, torrent and raging waters were shorthand for any overwhelming force or any sense of general chaos they may have been up against – anything that you might be up against, right now, in your life.

Think about what you’re up against right now, what’s really troubling you, what you’re really worried about. Think of it; bring it to mind.

OK, now imagine the power and wisdom and goodness of the Lord right there alongside you in that situation. Do you think anything you’re up against can withstand the power, wisdom and goodness of the Lord? Of course not. And that knowledge of the God and faith in the Lord that you have – when you carry it with you – it will never let you down or leave you defeated and depleted.

No, if you make an effort to be mindful of the Lord's presence in your life and in our world, by remembering what we sing and say and pray here today, then there is nothing you can't stand up against and overcome.

I tell you what. Take the bulletin with you today and look up the hymns we're singing. Print out a copy of the lyrics or write down some key words.

And if you don't have a computer and printer, I've put a few copies of today's hymns on the credenza.

So yes, however you can do it, take today's hymns with you through the week ahead and make a practice of doing that every week – whether it's the hymns or anthem, the sermon or prayers, or the children's message. Whatever touches your heart and stimulates your thinking, take it with you and use it to remind you that you are not alone in this, and God and your church is with you and that you will get through it. Let that knowledge and faith bring you courage and peace.

The closing words of today's Psalm of Ascent, the closing words that are sung in Psalm 124 are words of praise for deliverance and profession of trust in God. This, too, is important. "Blessed be the Lord..." sang the Israelites. "Bless be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped," we are free!

Do you feel that freedom in your life? Would you like to? Well, this is the way to have it – by truly taking in what we say and sing and pray here in worship, take it into your heart and soul and mind, and then take it with you into the week ahead, remind yourself of it daily. That's where freedom from worry and fear is to be found. That's what opens the way to wisdom and guidance and inner peace and contentment.

"Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth," says the Psalm. "Our help is in the name of the Lord," our help is in the knowledge, and love and truth of the Lord, the grace, mercy, peace, abundance, provision and salvation of the Lord.

The title of today's sermon is, "Lord, help me." It's something we say when faced with an overwhelming, impossible situation. We say, "Lord, help me," or "Lord, help us." It's often said in resignation, knowing that there's nothing more we can do.

Well, today you've been given something you can do. You can have your presence here today make a difference in your life out there this week. Take with you something of what you hear and experience today. Keep it nearby this week. And then come back next week and every week and do it again.

Because, folks, our help truly is in the name of the Lord, the presence of the Lord, who is with us – with you, this day, this week, and in all the weeks to come. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of hope, we pray to you out of our distress. We pray as people who are under constant assault from the demands and cares of this world.

Everything seems out of order; nothing seems to make sense. Life is a constant battle just to keep our heads above water.

It seems that there is a foe around every corner looking to ensnare us. If it weren't for your steadfast love, then surely, we would have already been swallowed up.

Our hope, our salvation, our strength, our health, our very being is because of you, O God. So, it is to you that we lift our prayers, our thanksgivings and our needs. We pray for those dealing with illness, injury and disease. We pray, also, for those devastated in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

In all the storms of life, O Lord, in all the struggles of this world, we place our lives in your hands.

And as we do so, we remember and pray the prayer that you taught us, saying together:

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.