

Sermon on Psalm 123 for Advent prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Psalm 123:1-4

It's okay to be honest as we wait for the rescue only Jesus can bring.

Monday morning I returned home from taking the kids to school, grabbed my coffee and was ready to get to work as I opened my bag for my ipad. It wasn't there.

I looked all over. Made no sense. Did I leave it at church? So I opened the find my device app as I was driving to the church to check and it pinged at the elementary school so I drove there. I started blaming the kids who surely grabbed my ipad along with theirs in the morning rush. I even tried blaming Stacy... maybe she put it in one of their backpacks.

The staff searched the kids' backpacks... nothing. So I looked again at the app and the ping was coming from the handicap spot in the parking lot where I drop the kids off each day.

As I walked up to my ipad - with a tire mark on the case - it all came back to me. That morning I used my ipad to do my daily Bible plan and carried it outside with me to let a dog out. The disobedient dog didn't come right back in and instead got into a mess in the yard, which I went to clean up and placed my ipad on the roof of the van so I could get the scooper and handle the mess. Finishing that task I went back inside and the day was underway.

So that ipad drove on the roof of our van from our house to the middle school, from there to the elementary school until I opened the back door to get Adia's walker which must have knocked it off, where either I or multiple other people drove over it...

Now I know this is a "first world problem" story.

But I was struck that my Monday is a great picture of our existence. There is difficulty or trauma, even anxiety for what we have to face. Events don't go our way and we want to blame someone else. Really it is us who is to blame. It becomes a feeling that kind of sits in the pit of your stomach!

Too many of those kinds of days and we can't take it. Maybe that is where you are this morning.

Advent (waiting before Christmas) is supposed to expose that feeling in anticipation of incarnation, or Christ's return.

“The entire thrust of this season at the end of the church year is designed to bring us face-to-face with reality—reality about sin and death, reality about the human race, reality about God. Something ultimate has entered our world, something or Someone that calls us to attention, calls us out of our daily preoccupations and our routine points of view. That is what this season with its special biblical readings is designed to reveal” – Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*

Long Advent, a couple of added weeks which I hope doesn't cut into your pre-Thanksgiving gratefulness!

But it is really timely year-round.

Our house is decorated, the trees are up, and with all this tinsel has come the sounds of Christmas as well. It's music. We may even sing some of these songs as we make our way to the New Year, but we also want songs to guide our Advent. Our waiting for our King, in need of his grace, melodic reminders of who is enthroned over everything.

We begin with this Pilgrim Song. A song of ascent, for the congregation of God's people to sing as they go up to Jerusalem, to the temple for worship.

This morning we want to take it backwards.

It's Okay to be Honest

Psalm 123 is a community lament. The psalm goes beyond simply asking for a safe journey; it seeks relief from the scorn (a visible sign of God's mercy, which might even benefit those showing scorn). Christians should have no difficulty in praying the same way.

We don't know for sure what circumstance led to the creation of this song. Maybe worshipers were harassed by Gentiles, or by unfaithful Jews, rich and full of contempt toward the faithful for stopping work and routine to worship.

Whatever the exact reason, they have had enough, and need rescue.

They say so, to God. Keep in mind that this is a worship song with the purpose of priming them for a feast. So it is normative to be honest.

Psalm 123:3-4 "Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. 4 Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud." (ESV)

Where do we start the list?!

War. Disease. Incompetence of those who are supposed to lead us. Economic realities, which we may not fully understand but affect everyone around us.

Relationships that have covenantal bonds seem ruined. The weight of our purpose seems too heavy. Children. Cancer. Aging. Anxiety. Angst.

What's on your list?

Following Jesus then adds a layer to everything, how people perceive us. Sus to others.

All of it piled on leads us to exasperation. Our souls have had more than enough. And the worshipers here say so.

But for some reason in the church we put on a good face. We hate when the government makes mask mandates but we live almost exclusively wearing metaphorical ones.

We don't want to seem needy, or we are too proud for the truth to come out. The reality of the human condition is that there is always someone "worse off" than you. But that doesn't remove or cheapen your need for rescue.

A posture of just keeping up appearances will also dim our eyes and lead us to miss life as we are supposed to have it.

Pastors can be the worst about this! I used to be less gentle than I am now, and I would go to pastors' meetings and someone would ask how things were going. By this time I had learned you had to say how great they were, or at the least they were fine. But I would be like "I can't handle it, I am so weak, I am hanging on by a thread..." There usually wouldn't be a response, just the look of surprise and worry, then I would say "but the thread is Jesus!"

This song, and so many more like it, establish that it is okay, it is expected, to be honest about our experience. Honest about the world pushing in, about our own sin and foolishness.

Some of us just read in our yearly reading Lamentations. Honesty in the wake of exile.

Lamentations "guides our lips and our hearts in how to relate to this world. On the one hand, we are to take the horrors of this fallen world with utter seriousness. Christians of all people should not be frivolous or trite, given our doctrine of creation, the fall, and original sin. Yet on the other hand, the redemptive purposes of God in his grace get down even underneath the weight of sin and fallenness. Christ has himself gone through suffering and death and has come out on the other side. He has conquered every final reason for us to throw our hands up in the air. In him, kindness appeared in tangible, human form, yet not kindness that ignores evil and sadness. This was a steely kindness that came for the very purpose of overcoming all evil and sadness." GTB

Some of us are coming into this season with this weight, and it's okay to be honest about it. To let the community carry the weight with you, to lament alongside you.

The sweetness of Advent might be missed if we aren't honestly acquainted with the sour of life in our age.

It's okay to be honest. It is part of our waiting.

We Wait for Rescue from Rescue

Now, we have something these first singers didn't. When they cry out for mercy, for God to be gracious to them, we have seen his greatest act of mercy and grace in the first arrival of Jesus.

It's the story we live to tell. Humanity, created in the image of God, meant for enjoying him forever, falls for the lure of being god ourselves and in an act of disobedience humanity is sent out of the garden to toil in pain.

Where humanity disregards God however, he does not disregard us. He chooses a people to announce what life with him looks like. Even in their unfaithfulness he is faithful. So faithful he comes himself, the Son, as a baby to experience all of humanity and live a perfect, sinless life. A life he would sacrifice for us, taking on a judgment our sin deserves and in doing so granting all those who believe forgiveness and a future.

Eternal life with him.

Jesus has taken on the contempt, the shame, our sin, and the scorn of the world and he says "it is finished." Forgiveness is yours, new life is yours, freedom is yours.

"The mercy of God does not depend on human virtue for its fulfillment."
– Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*

And that rescue empowers us as we eagerly await his return, to set everything right, to finally and fully heal, to wipe every tear from our eyes, to change the world for eternity.

It is then growing in this truth, enthused by the Holy Spirit, that we wait for what is promised.

Ephesians 1:11-14 "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." (ESV)

Evenso, we still feel the need for rescue, from all that is opposed to him.

I think this idea matches how salvation is talked about in the New Testament. Paul, a key author, uses different tenses when writing about Salvation.

By grace we have been saved. The cross is the power of God to those who are being saved. And, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.” (Romans 5:9 ESV)

“Why, then, does the New Testament speak of salvation in three tenses? The answer lies in considering what happens in salvation. Initially, at the point of regeneration, our sins are forgiven— entirely and completely. We have been delivered from sin’s penalty. Through faith, we are reckoned to be righteous—as righteous as Christ is. Then, there is sanctification—a process whereby we are being delivered from sin’s power. Ultimately, in heaven, we will be delivered from sin’s presence. John Stott has argued that when Paul reasoned with Governor Felix about “righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment” (Acts 24:25), he was pointing out the three tenses of salvation.” Derek Thomas

“At every stage—justification, sanctification, glorification—we come with empty hands, seeking mercy from our heavenly Father.”

We are in the in-between, in need of mercy still as we make this journey.

And the song says we keep a close eye.

Psalm 123:2 “Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us.” (ESV)

Given “the context, with its repetition of the worshipers’ “eyes” directed to the Lord, shows that the image is that of waiting patiently and trustingly for God to act; the psalm is concerned with gaining God’s help.”

With eyes peeled we become obedient, trusting, looking to the Lord for provision in the midst of life now.

The psalm enables the pilgrims to pray for safety and for relief; it also sharpens their commitment to the journey, costly and dangerous as it might at times have been.

Salvation, as we often think of it - sin handled, go to heaven - is not all there is. The Kingdom is ever expanding to bring His peace in the midst of ashes, leading us onward, back to the garden, to dwell with God.

Honesty helps us see how good this is.

The rescue we have already experienced helps us trust his promise and power to deliver.

The incarnation of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ is good, but what is to come is beyond our imaginations. May that give us buoyancy as we wait.

Only Jesus Can Do This

When the world says look within or suggests we put our hope in schemes or man. This song reminds us where to look.

Psalm 123:1 “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!” (ESV)

“these words seem to contain a tacit contrast between the troubled and confused state of this world and God’s heavenly kingdom, from whence he so manages and governs all things, that whenever it pleases him, he calms all the agitations of the world, comes to the rescue of the desperate and the despairing, restores light by dispelling darkness, and raises up such as were cast down and laid prostrate on the ground. This the Psalmist confirms by the verb lift up; which intimates, that although all worldly resources fail us, we must raise our eyes upward to heaven, where God remains unchangeably the same, despite the mad impetuosity of men in turning all things here below upside down.” - John Calvin

Jesus is the answer to this prayer.

2 Corinthians 1:20 “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.” (ESV)

I take this to mean he is the answer to the promises to hear the people's cries for help. His arrival answers our hurt, our needs.

1 Peter 1:10-12 “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, 11 inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. 12 It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.” (ESV)

So now we look to him with confidence in who he is and what he has done for us, expectant of what is to come.

"The main difference between Christians and others is that we take God seriously and they do not. We really do believe that he is the central reality of all existence. We really do pay attention to what he is and what he does. We really do order our lives in response to that reality and not to some other. Paying attention to God involves a realization that he works." (Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*)

He is the answer to our experience, he is the King we need to rule and rescue us. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

Colossians 1:15-17 “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (ESV)

“So here, those faithful to the Lord await the good that he, and only he, can give. To God and God alone they lift up their eyes (v. 1). There is good news proclaimed from God to his people, but this good news of grace and strength and salvation is found in only one place and through only one Lord. Only he who is enthroned in the heavens is worthy of our trust, and only he can deliver. Indeed, at the climax

of all of history, God did indeed deliver—by sending his own Son so that sinners can be made right with God based on what Christ has done.” GTB

John 14:1-4 “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2 In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way to where I am going.” (ESV)

This song follows others and together they crescendo in a God who is enough.

“The pain of exile from the land (120:5) is the pain of separation from God. The only resolution to this pain is to look to Yahweh himself for help, for a salvation that brings the exiles home (121). Home will be realized only where God is present (122), and the best thing about the presence of God is the joy of reliance upon him (123). He is enough for us, and he alone.” James M. Hamilton Jr.

We wait honestly, from his great rescue of our souls, eager for eternity, knowing he is the only One that can deliver.

Revelation 7:15-17 “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. 16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (ESV)

This is what we wait for this long Advent.

It’s okay to be honest as we wait for the rescue only Jesus can bring.

Recently on a retreat I hiked to the top of this hill but came back down to pray, and it was in that lower place that I felt the peaceful presence of God, what I described to others there as a disruptive peace. But in describing the moment I said that I “ascended down the hill.”

While that doesn't make sense grammatically, spiritually I think it does. We come to the lower place to lift our eyes. Honest about all of this. Anchor in the hope we have in Jesus.

Take heart, you are not alone, you are on your way home, lift your eyes to the One seated on the throne in the heavens!

“May Almighty God, by whose Providence our Savior Christ came among us in great humility, sanctify you with the light of his blessing and set you free from all sin. Amen. May he whose second coming in power and great glory we await, make you steadfast in faith, joyful in hope, and constant in love. Amen. May you who rejoice in the first advent of our Redeemer, at his second advent be rewarded with eternal life. Amen. And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you for ever. Amen.”

– Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*