

“DEPENDING ON GOD”

Psalm 124 October 7, 2018

Today is the last message in the sermon series “Season of Creation” and the focus today is “Blessing All Creatures: Bring It!” This past week George and I were blessed to take a short road trip to Spearfish Canyon, South Dakota, and spend a few days at the Lodge there. We had taken a vacation several years ago touring Wyoming and many of the sights we had missed on previous trips to Yellowstone National Park. When we got to Devil’s Tower and were ready to head home for Pine, we spent one night at the Spearfish Canyon Lodge and were overwhelmed by the beauty of the canyon! At that time we were advised to return in the fall because everything was at its peak when you could view the autumn colors in the canyon. They were so right!

Tuesday morning we hiked down to Roughlatch Falls, on the road behind the lodge. We were surrounded with the glory of creation and it was amazing!! The falls themselves were spectacular and the scenery around them was so beautiful. We were there the last two days of Indian Summer and things went downhill from there with that cold front coming thru on Wednesday. But that day we continued up the dirt road from those falls and it looked a lot like the photo I have brought in. There was the gold surrounding us on both sides of the car and it just went on and on!! We got to the area where they filmed Dances with Wolves and turned around and headed back. We were so blessed by God’s handiwork and the hymn “How Great Thou Art” kept going through my head:

“When through the woods and forest glades I wander, and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees; when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze; Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee; how great thou art, and how great thou art...”

In reflecting on Psalm 124, we know this is a psalm of David written in difficult circumstances. David uses language of an unsettled creation to describe his difficulties. “Their anger was kindled against us” brings to mind a forest fire. “Waters...streams...raging waters...engulfing us...sweeping over our soul” makes us think of flooding. “Snares” and trappers catch birds. David’s plight is in line with the plight of the rest of creation. We are interconnected.

David’s imagery in this psalm brings to mind Jesus walking out on the stormy water to a boat where Peter stood on the side. Peter asked Jesus to allow

him to come out on the water, and Jesus allowed it. While Peter remained focused on Jesus, he was able to do the impossible, walk on water. Once he focused on the storms around him, he began to sink. David saw the storms around him. He felt the waves crashing around him and felt like a bird caught in the snare. Yet, as he reminded himself, “had the Lord not been on our side.” He had hope that the storms would not overtake him, that the snares could not hold him. As long as he kept his focus on the Lord who was with him, then who could be against him?

It’s easy to point to the times of crisis as times when we especially depend on God, but the truth of the matter is, we are all completely dependent on God all the time. We need God. We need Jesus Christ. We need him every day, and we need him for all things.

Psalm 124 imagines what would happen if God did not intervene to help. In some ways it’s almost the exact opposite of John Lennon’s famous song “Imagine.” John Lennon imagined a world without God or heaven and thought it would be a better place. Psalm 124 imagines what would happen without God, and it is a picture of complete devastation.

You could also call this psalm “The Great Escape,” because the psalmist escapes great danger and almost certain disaster. But unlike the movie by the same title, he doesn’t escape because of his own skill or ingenuity but because God intervened to help.

At its core Psalm 124 teaches you that you can depend on God, and that you must depend on God if you want to make it safely to the other side. And in teaching us to depend on God, the psalm encourages us to do three things in particular: 1) Affirm the difference God makes in your life. 2) Praise God for his protection and deliverance in your life. 3) Tell others how God has helped you.

Affirm the difference God makes in your life. Let’s look back at verses 1-5: “if the Lord had not been on our side—let Israel say if the Lord had not been on our side when men attacked us, when their anger flared against us, they would have swallowed us alive; the flood would have engulfed us; the torrent would have swept over us, the raging waters would have swept us away. (Psalm 124:1-5)

Here the psalmist encourages all of Israel to affirm the difference that God makes. The key word in this section is the word “if.” “If” is a tiny little word with big implications. And here the “if’s” focus on what might have happened if

not for God. “If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have been destroyed.”

Note that the phrase “IF the Lord had not been on our side” is repeated. This is for emphasis but also because the second time it is spoken as an affirmation. First the psalmist says it, but then he encourages all of Israel to repeat it as an affirmation of the truth. I like the way Eugene Peterson translates the phrase” Let all Israel say” in his Bible paraphrase The Message. He translates it this way: “All together now, Israel, sing out!” Okay everyone, Let’s all sing it out together, “If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have been destroyed.” Well, that’s a big difference!

The psalmist uses striking flood imagery here to highlight the difference. “If the Lord had not been on our side when men attacked,” the psalmist says, “they would have swallowed us alive; the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent swept over us, the raging waters would have swept us away.” This is no slow rising of water causing flooding damage in your home. This is a flash flood or tsunami where the rushing waters swallow you alive, sweeping you and everything else away in its path.

If the Lord had not been on our side, it would have been all over. But it’s not all over. We survived the attack, and the bottom line is, we’re still here! (We can relate to this here in Pine Bluffs after surviving the microburst that devastated our community here a year ago.) If God is on your side, what difference does it make? It makes all the difference! And the psalmist knows that, he remembers that, he acknowledges that, and he encourages all of Israel to affirm it with him. “All together now, Israel, sing out!” now, Israel, sing out!” It’s good to review God’s past deliverances and even all the might-have -beens in order to give you confidence for the present and hope for the future.

Praise God for his protection and deliverance in your life. God not only protect you from potential dangers; he also delivers you from present dangers. “Praise be to the Lord, who has not let us be torn by their teeth. We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler’s snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped.” (Psalm 124:6-7).

Here the psalmist changes from flood imagery to wild animal imagery. He may have already hinted at the wild animal imagery back in verse 3 when he spoke about “being swallowed alive,” but here it becomes very clear with this

phrase “torn by their teeth.” The picture here is of a wild animal attacking you and tearing at your flesh. The psalmist says God did not let that happen to them.

The Bible is full of God’s promises to protect his people. God promises in Isaiah 43:2: “When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.” (Isaiah 43:2) Or in another Psalm of Ascent, Psalm 121 where we read: “The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.” (Psalm 121:7-8)

Life is a spiritual battle, and as Christians we are not exempt from the battle. In fact God puts us right on the front lines. As a Christian you must be ready to experience persecution, you must be ready to suffer for your faith. Verse 3 talked about the anger of the men who attacked. Well, guess what? People get angry at the church. They get angry at you when you speak up or stand up for the truth. But take heart because God is on your side. He protects you when you are in danger.

Tell others how God has helped you. How do you acknowledge your complete dependence on God? First of all, affirm the difference God makes in your life. Secondly, praise God for his protection and deliverance in your life. And then thirdly, tell others how God has helped you.

Let’s look at verse 8 now: “Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” (Psalm 124:8) This verse connects back to the opening verses of Psalm 121 “I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of Heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1-2)

Back in Psalm 121 the emphasis fell on God as Maker of heaven and earth, while here in Verse 8 the emphasis falls on the name of the Lord. The name of the Lord here is Yahweh once again, God’s covenant name that speaks of his character; his faithfulness, his presence, his power, his attributes.

Now contrast “the name of the Lord” here in verse 8 with “men” back in verse 2. Man versus God—who do you think is going to win? Once again why fear that which comes from the ground or the dust when you have God on your side?

It’s interesting, when you trace the progression of this psalm you will notice that first the psalmist encourages all of Israel to affirm the difference God

makes (verses 1-5). Next the psalmist gives praise to God for his protection and deliverance (verses 6-7). And now finally the psalmist testifies that the Lord is the one who has helped them (verse 8). And so the psalm moves from affirmation to praise to testimony. Why have you escaped? Because the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth is on your side! And if the Lord made the heavens and the earth, then he can do anything! So you can trust him. You can depend on him.

The God who is of considerable help is the one who made heaven and earth. Seriously: if God made all of this, the ground I walk on, the gravity that holds me in place, the breath I just took, the mountains, oceans, amoeba and eagles, this great God most clearly is able to help. This is the God who alone can help, and will, as is evidenced by what God has done over time, consistently, and most especially in the wonder of Christmas morning, taking on flesh, becoming one of us, what we all have been, mortal, human, vulnerable, lovely.

To contemplate what would have happened without this Lord is helpful. Were not the Lord on our side, the flood would have swept us away. Without the Lord we would have been “swallowed up alive.” We might feel swallowed up alive, but if you’re listening to this, you haven’t been. God is good. We are still here, by the grace of God—and so we can take good hope in the God of Advent and Christmas, the God who ascended by coming down, and delivering real help to us, and to all God’s children in need. Now, as his disciples, what are you planning to do for your part in this?

There are so many things we need to be doing in our care of creation. The storms and waves and poor stewardship feel overwhelming. In the midst of it, though, we have to keep our focus on the Lord. The Lord is on our side. As Christians, we need to understand that care for creation is a faith issue—a stewardship issue. It is not a political issue, although there are political differences about how we handle the care for creation. We need to quite focusing on the waves and snares and focus on the Lord...and start!