

The Church is in Our Hands (Psalm 126)
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The Fifth Sunday in Lent (Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8)
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-church-is-in-our-hands

Psalm 126 (NIV) A song of ascents

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them." The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Maybe you noticed this psalm comes with a subtitle: "A Song of Ascents." Psalm 126 is a part of a collection of fifteen psalms all marked by the same subtitle (Psalm 120-134).

There are various ways the "Songs of Ascents" have meaning. The most likely and widely held theory about the superscription is that "ascents" refers to the journeys made by pilgrims to the three annual festivals observed in Jerusalem. Pilgrims might recite these psalms on their journey to Jerusalem.

Imagine the scene (similar to one we all recognize here in Jefferson City) ... you've climbed the hills leading up to Jerusalem and as you rise to the crest of the last hill, finally the scene unfolds before you ... the great city of Jerusalem, the ancient city of David, with the grandeur of the Temple shining in the brilliant sunshine! It is not surprising that long after the Temple had been destroyed, the rabbis would claim, "Whoever has not seen the Temple ... has never seen a beautiful building in his life."¹ Feel the lump in the throat as the weary pilgrim sighs with relief and begins the 122nd Psalm: *I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go up to the house of the Lord!'*

Some have associated them with the 15 steps one must climb in order to reach the Temple Mount. While the Temple was destroyed in 70 ACE, the steps on the south end of the Temple Mount survive even today. These steps are not uniform but are of various sizes, varying widths and differing heights. No two steps are alike and each requires attention. Some suggest they vary to cause pilgrims to reflect carefully in preparation for visiting the great Temple. With each step the worshiper would recite, or perhaps, sing a psalm of ascent.

¹ Notes on the splendor of ancient Jerusalem are from William Ramsey, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Nov. 1998, 19, and, Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem, One City, Three Faiths*, 1991, 134

Others have suggested these are the hymns composed by the Israelites when they returned to Jerusalem after their long exile as slaves in Babylon.

We at First Baptist Church have a big past. We are 185 years old and have a long, significant history here along the banks of the Missouri River. We've seen it all and it would be easy to be so absorbed by our history that we overlook the present moment.

We are a church of anchors and sails that extend from our founding all the way to the present moment. Where we go in the future is yet to be determined. We are making the decisions that lead us to our future! We will form the church that will go forward with confidence in the abiding presence of God. Here's how we describe our community of faith:

**The mission of FBCJC is to WELCOME warmly, (slide 1)
GROW faithfully & SERVE generously (slide 2);
leading people into LIFE-GIVING relationships with Christ and each other (slide 3).
[Rotate 3 slides]**

The church is made up of you and me. We meet at 301 E Capitol Ave but we realize it's only a building. The 1987 fire taught us this important distinction. The church goes wherever we go as an extension of our collective identity. This church is nothing if we don't live the life and carry the light.

How we embody our identity as the church is crucial. There is not a backup plan if we fail. The big truth this morning is that the church is in your hands and mine. Our ancestors placed it in our hands in their time. That's the way it was meant to be. The ancients understood this as they received the faith from their elders and faithfully handed it off to the next generation who carry out this duty as our sacred act of worship and service. Our 3-line mission statement gives us much to think about. Maybe for today we could turn the statements into questions to stir our thinking:

Do we welcome warmly? (slide 1)

The issue of hospitality and our willingness to greet everyone we meet as though we are meeting Christ is the test of our welcome. Or, do we exhibit a conditional welcome where our reality doesn't match our mission? Do *some* people feel unwelcomed here? Do *some* people feel our judgment because we feel principled about some issue. To be truly welcoming, we will need to widen our appreciation of those around us in order that we see them through the eyes of God's love.

Are we growing faithfully & serving generously? (slide 2)

The life of Christ is being formed in us and we are slowly being transformed from the inside out. The incongruities of our faith, when what we say is contradicted by what we do, when our walk is in contrast to our talk, we have growth issues. At worst we've stopped growing and in some cases, we may have regressed until we are more childlike than ever. One criterion we state is that our growth is understood by our service.

Are we leading people into life-giving relationships with Christ and with others? (slide 3)

To be more specific, are you and I seeking to live out a life-giving relationship with those with whom we share life ... our family, our friends, our fellow church members, all those we come into contact with? **[Take down slides]**

Friends, we are a church in transition. We have big decisions to make. We are a community with “one of everything,” so how will we move forward in the midst of the width and breadth of our diversity? Perhaps we can find a way to commit ourselves more than ever to the 3 demands of our mission statement?

Let’s look to our mission statement as a map we can follow that will give us the wisdom of knowing how to move forward. We need one another and need to lean on one another for the days ahead.

To do so would mean we come together rather than drawing fixed lines and boundaries. To do so means we encourage one another as each of us is determined to live out our mission.

Sometimes, I Am Startled Out of Myself

Barbara Crooker

like this morning, when the wild geese came squawking,
flapping their rusty hinges, and something about their trek
across the sky made me think about my life, the places
of brokenness, the places of sorrow, the places where grief
has strung me out to dry. And then the geese come calling,
the leader falling back when tired, another taking her place.
Hope is borne on wings. Look at the trees. They turn to gold
for a brief while, then lose it all each November.
Through the cold months, they stand, take the worst
weather has to offer. And still, they put out shy green leaves
come April, come May. The geese glide over the cornfields,
land on the pond with its sedges and reeds.
You do not have to be wise. Even a goose knows how to find
shelter, where the corn still lies in the stubble and dried stalks.
All we do is pass through here, the best way we can.
They stitch up the sky, and it is whole again.²

Now we move to the table that unites us Christ’s servants ...

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² Barbara Crooker, “Sometimes, I Am Startled Out of Myself,” *Radiance*, Cincinnati, OH: Word Press, 2005