

Keeping In Touch

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE SECOND CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF STAFFORD

A PASTORAL MESSAGE

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Rev. Jessica Palys

Psalm 27; Matthew 23

I've heard it said that one way to begin a daily prayer routine is to read through one psalm per day, really read it, aloud, even multiple times. I admit, my prayer life and spiritual routine could use some work, and so this is one of the methods I've pondered to improve it. I've also started a daily habit of prayer (which lasted a few weeks)... and began daily devotional readings (for a few days)... and worked on using yoga as a meditative prayer (that one actually lasted a few months!)

As humans, we like to think that we set a goal, work towards that goal, achieve that goal, and move onto the next. But that's really not reality. Most of us have so many stops and starts; so many incremental changes that may or may not hold; two leaps forward and then a loss of balance and a tumble backward down the stairs. As most of us know on a personal level - life just does

not hold to a linear logic. Progress doesn't usually happen in a straight line. Love doesn't always lead to happily ever after. Fear doesn't just turn into trust, and trust falters before it fully rebuilds. Spring never seems to follow winter, but rather relapses into 2nd winter and 3rd winter before it really comes. The 5 stages of grief don't actually happen in chronological stages, rather more like tangle of knitting yarn. Time doesn't always heal, achievements don't always stick.

Not all of the psalms hit the right button for the kind of prayer I need today in the 21st century. But this psalm is one that might be worthwhile.

To preach or pray on this psalm, we might be tempted to rearrange the order of the stanzas... to have the psalmist begin with his shaky, desperate faith, and conclude with conviction; To go from the request made in a small, despairing voice to proclaiming a robust faith in a confident shout; moving from doubt to certainty, from fear to trust, from dark to light. Indeed, isn't that how we imagine how prayer ought to go, how faith ought to go, how our lives ought to work? Should we expect to pray in a linear fashion - from need to achieved, from meek to courageous, from fear to confidence?

Not really. Why would prayer be any different than any other habit of human life? Why would a prayer habit, or any prayer itself really, follow some logical, linear path when our goals, our lives, our emotions and especially our thought patterns tend to go in circles? When we talk to God, when we talk to the great divine breath of the universe that created all things, should we expect to have only one thought present at any given time? That is what I appreciate about this psalm.

This Psalm attests to the complex emotions of life and of faith. In 14 verses we hear him shift from trust to uncertainty; from triumphant to lost and back to triumphant.

'Even though an army encamps against me, in my heart I shall not fear...' he says with resolve.

'God will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble...' he says, perhaps to steady himself.

And then he pleads,

'Do not hide your face from me, O God. Do not turn your servant away in anger, when you have been my help. Do not cast me off...'

And it seems like he moves himself back to belief, self-soothing himself with his own words; ... 'even If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up. Teach me your ways, o Lord'

But then seems to waver again,

'Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me with violence on their breath'

And then lastly, after all his uncertainty, he makes a soaring proclamation that grabs us all by the heart;

'I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!'

The psalmist is both confident and apprehensive; he both pleads for help and exalts that help is near. Both elements exist simultaneously. How true to life it is; true to life, true to grief, true to expectation, true to journeys of all kinds. At any given time, opposing emotions are present in our hearts, in our heads, and in our prayers.

I imagine this is present in all our lives, in any given career path. I imagine most of us did some flailing about in our professional lives. A lucky few of us are fortunate enough to have an idea of our destination at our beginning, but even for those fortunate, I'm sure there were still periods of fits and starts where we feelings of security were met with feelings of mundanity; where gratitude for our profession mingled with curiosity of what else was out there. There were probably phases dominated with more questions than answers, met with answers only you yourself could give; and I'm sure there were periods of existential crises wondering where we were, where we were going and if we still wanted that destination anyways. And yet, we keep moving forward.

I imagine in every medical journey, there are moments of waffling wildly from catastrophe to optimism. One minute holds the crushing certainty of the diagnosis, and in the next minute we list all the things that can mitigate the outcome, including prayer. In our hearts we are comforted by the presence of God and our loved ones in our suffering, and yet our minds are clouded with the presence of the enemy within. Our wail of lamentation empties our lungs and leaves us breathless... and in the next breath we pledge to fight, to resist, and to persevere. We plead with God and seek God's refuge from our fears, and set our hearts in patience to wait for the outcome while we wait for the Lord. And time keeps moving us forward.

And I imagine how true this is in a refugee journey. How people think they ought to leave, then don't, then flee in urgent panic, barely avoiding marching armies or murderous violence. Or they move once, then twice, then a third time, all the while trying to maintain a life, to build an emotional shelter for themselves and their children. It becomes apparent how doubt and uncertainty fills the hearts and minds of every migrant on a journey, how a piece of their heart stays behind every time they leave a place. How even as they flee, too often they face resentment or bullies or maltreatment where they arrive. And how they still look to a Divine force who leads people through a wilderness of uncertainty with promise - whatever tradition of faith it might be. And still, they keep moving forward - because there is no turning back.

In our gospel reading today, we are drawing closer to the danger, on the journey to Jerusalem. We hear the Pharisees laying out the looming reality of Jesus' chosen course; Herod is there, in Jerusalem, and he intends to have you killed. While some gospels paint the Pharisees as an enemy, in the gospel of Luke they are more like complicit bystanders - and sometimes converse - who dialogue and debate with Jesus. So we can look at this as a taunt, or as a warning: spare yourself and avoid this terrible end.

But Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem. Jesus says, yeah, Herod's a bad guy and I see the danger. But I've declared my intent; I've preached my message; I've picked my destination; I've seen my diagnosis and I can't go back. I will keep moving forward. I will continue to love and heal these people and face what comes - face the terrors of Herod and his empire.

And you can hear Jesus' desire. His plea, which differs from the Psalmist, is not for God to respond, but for the people; Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I longed to gather your children as a hen gathers its chicks'. How I longed for you to receive me; how I longed for you to accept me - but you didn't, you won't. Jesus has weighed the costs and knows the outcome, but braves it anyways. With a palpable mix of strength and determination and grief, he's already accepted his fate. So with resolve and deep resignation, he keeps moving forward. Like us, like the migrant; he keeps moving forward.

Sometimes we just commit to following the path that we've set on, sometimes we know that moving forward is all that's possible, because we can't turn back. And so we make the conscience decision to believe, and to wait on the Lord.

The psalmists' decision to believe must be very similar to any person in the middle of a very scary journey. It is precisely in the face of our fear that hope seems most necessary. The psalmists' will to live is like a migrant's will to live.

The psalmists' will to trust is the medical patients' will to trust.

The psalmists' will to believe in the significance that his life matters to God is mirrored our determination to make our lives matter.

And so in the midst of his own doubt and fear, the psalmist offers up antidote: the choice of confidence in God and in himself. Faced with human finiteness, he channels his energy towards trust, and his confidence eventually grows. He works on his trust by praising God, reciting the places God has shown up in his life. And then he calls on God, making a request. And then, in the prayer, he counsels himself not to fear. Our psalm begins with an untested, even naive bravado, weakened in the middle as we'd expect, but rests with the resolute intention for optimism. As goes our lives. As goes our faith. And still, we wait for the Lord. We turn toward Jerusalem, because it's the right thing to do - the only thing to do. We proclaim that we believe we shall see the goodness of God in the land of the living. And so, we wait for the Lord. Such is the time of Lent. Let us be resolute on our journey. Amen.

TREASURER'S REPORT

Category	Year-To-Date	Budget-To-Date	Percentage
R21—Freewill	\$ 1,570.63	\$ 1,100.00	143%
R22—Pledges	\$ 18,902.00	\$ 19,000.00	95%
R23—Contributions	\$ 4,883.94	\$ 7,000.00	70%
R24—Fund Raising	\$ 11,221.10	\$ 10,000.00	112%
Capital Campaign	\$1,983.00	\$ 2,528.00	78%

Thru December 31

DEACONS

Hello everyone!

I just wanted to thank everyone for the warm welcome of our guest minister a few weeks back, Reverend Nina Schmid. Throughout February, we will be visited by another guest minister, the Reverend Carrie Bail.

If you were wondering, there is no gender bias to the ministers that we reach out to from the pulpit supply list! Though I am always happy to see women in ministry. The first factor that we consider before reaching out to someone is, how close are they to the church? For their convenience, and for ours. Some pastors have limits on how far they would like to drive to fill in. They are also able to request mileage compensation and so, we certainly wouldn't be asking a minister from, say, Boston to drive all this way to visit us!

I have a running list of the closest ministers on the supply list to us! The supply list also updates as pastors become available or unavailable. If I get feedback that a minister is well-liked, I keep them in mind for future openings. Though, sometimes it is hard to fill certain dates, and sometimes familiar ministers are not available on a given week or month!

Thank you all for your patience during this process, as we navigate this time of "in between".

Sincerely in Christ's peace,
Sarah R.G. Head Deacon

IN AND AROUND THE CHURCH ...

Our Hearts and Prayers reach out to our Brothers and Sisters who have various needs and struggles: Prayers for Florence as she celebrates her 99th birthday ... Safe travel for Aidan heading back to Pittsburg ... prayers for Linda Forester ... prayers for John ... Prayers for our members going through hardships ... prayers for our church family to heal after our great loss of Paster Bob ... prayers our church continues to grow ... prayers for peace and prosperity for all in the new year ... continued prayers for Carey ... prayers for Patrick Gilhuly being treated for Lukemia ... prayers for my family in the new year for prosperity, health and happiness ... continued prayers for Bertrand and Claire and family ... prayers for Kim ... prayers for Linda ... continued prayers for the DelBenes, Kim and Pat ... prayers for everyone affected by the wildfires in California ... prayers for all of those that feel they are all alone ... prayers for all who suffer with mental illness and addiction .. Prayers for Bob and Jen for a peaceful resolution of problems ...prayers for Peter ...prayers for wisdom for all our incoming Federal officials, especially the incoming President ... prayers for Karl Millikowski and family as they heal after his passing ... prayers for Shirley K. . Prayers for safety in the snow ... prayers for all who are suffering with cancer ...prayers for good health ... prayers for my Dad and my Mom in Heaven ... prayers for the homeless in this frigid weather ... prayers for Father Rick Ricaud ... prayers for my students who are struggling right now ... prayers for Jessica ... thank you to my church family for all your prayers ... prayers for neighbor Josie who has been ill ... prayers for David who had surgery ...

Celebrations: Irene's birthday ... Aidan celebrating his 20th birthday ...

A LIGHTER MOMENT...

Which band is always treated like royalty? — Queen

What is Jesus' favorite Beatles song? - Hey Jude

Why did the pianist put his head on the piano? - He was trying to play by ear

Which music festival was full of lumber? - Woodstock

What do you get when you play country music backwards? - You get your wife back, your dog back and your job back.

BIRTHDAYS AND ANNIVERSARIES

February Birthdays

February	3	Vader Brazalovich
	7	Adam Starvish
	9	Bruce Ekenbarger
	9	Timothy Glazier
	13	Kathy Ladr
	13	Michael Sedor
	14	Becky Wentworth
	15	Kevin Ladr
	20	Michelle Sedor
	21	Heather Hatch
	24	Jeanne Sanger

February Anniversaries

None

PULPIT SUPPLY FOR FEBRUARY

February 2
February 9
February 16
February 23

Rev. Carrie Bail

ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of Second Congregational Church will be held on Sunday, February 2, 2025 at 11:00 AM in Fellowship Hall. All are invited to attend.

FEBRUARY



Valentine's Day



February 2024

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			1	2	3	
4 Worship Service 9:30 AM Annual Meeting 11:00 AM	5	6	7	8	9	10
11 Worship Service 9:30 AM	12	13	14	15	16	17
18 Worship Service 9:30 AM Food Bank Sunday	19	20 6:30 Church Council	21	22	23	24
25 Worship Service 9:30 AM	26	27	28	29		