

I CRIED TO THE LORD

Psalm 120

(sermon idea from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* by Eugene H. Peterson)

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Imagine now the Hebrew pilgrims when they leave the routine of daily life and begin their journey – a journey from towns and villages, farms and cities – going up to the holy city, to Jerusalem, going up to worship. The fifteen psalms, beginning with Psalm 120, are called the Songs of Ascent. They are songs of the journey, songs for the road, songs sung by the pilgrims as they made their way to worship God.

Psalms 120-134 are an old, dog-eared songbook. Perhaps they were even sung in sequence, beginning with 120 all the way through the fifteenth song, ending with Psalm 134.

Since Jerusalem was the highest city geographically in Palestine, all who traveled there were ascending. But the ascent was not just a physical one. It was also a metaphor – a trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, an existence that advanced from one level to another in developing maturity – what Paul might call the “upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).

Three times a year the faithful Jews made that trip. These people, who had been saved by God’s act of the Exodus, whose identity had been defined in Sinai when God gave the Ten Commandments – they climbed at regular intervals the road to Jerusalem to worship. They refreshed their memories of God’s saving ways in the Feast of Passover in the spring; they renewed their commitments as God’s covenanted people at the Feast of Pentecost in early summer; they responded as a blessed community to the best that God had for them in the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn. They were a redeemed people, a commanded people, a blessed people. Even Jesus, when He was a lad, “went up to Jerusalem for the annual feast” (Luke 2:41-42).

There are no better songs for the road than these songs. These songs represent that in-between time, that time when you leave home and yet before you arrive at your destination, that time when you become part of the people of God yet have not made it to God’s heavenly kingdom. It’s like that time in the air when the trapeze artist lets go of the bar and hangs in midair, ready to catch another support. It’s a time of danger, of expectation, of uncertainty, of excitement, of extraordinary aliveness. It is the time when you sing the Songs of Ascent.

Isaiah describes the pilgrim going up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, who “may teach us His ways, and we may walk in His paths” (Isaiah 2:3). Isaiah 30:29 says, “You shall have a song as in the night when a holy feast is kept, and gladness of heart as when one sets out to the sound of the flute, to go to the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel.”

As Eugene Peterson has said, one aspect of the world that is harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. Our attention spans have been dumbed-down by 30-second commercials. In a world that wants novels flattened to a thirty-page abridgment, it's not very difficult to get people interested in the message of the gospel, but it is terribly difficult to sustain the interest. Many people claim to make a decision to follow Christ, to climb that hill to Jerusalem. But there is – let's admit it – a dreadful attrition rate. While so many claim to have a personal relationship with Christ, the evidence of church discipleship is sometimes slim. We have to be careful not to plan our discipleship around special retreats and rallies and conferences to see a new personality or to hear a new truth, to get a new experience. That's the life of a tourist – not the life of a pilgrim.

We want to join those pilgrims who ascended the hill of the holy city as they made their journey of faith. What we really need is a long obedience in the same direction. We're pilgrims. This world really isn't our home. We, like Abraham, have set out to a new place because we're a new people. Jesus answers Thomas as Thomas says, "Lord, we do not know where to go, we do not know the way." He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father but by me."

It is here in Psalm 120 that we begin that ascent to the city of worship. It is here that we find ourselves in midair, having left one trapeze bar – grasping for the next.

I. As we begin the journey, the psalmist is concerned with honesty (v. 1-4).

The psalmist is faced with lying lips and a deceitful tongue. Rather than perpetuating it and enjoying it and participating in it, he asks God to deliver him from it. "I cried to the Lord," and quickly he adds, "and He heard me."

When we face adversity, we face options. We can worry and we can complain. We can seek to manipulate our situation, or we can pray. For the psalmist, the stress works well for him. It drives him to his knees. Here is the beginning of the real answer.

"Deliver my soul." It's a word used for taking prey out of an animal's mouth before he gobbles it down. Snatch my soul away from those who lie, those (snake and frog) who are full of deceit.

He wants to get away from what his culture has to offer. Before anyone begins a real Christian journey, they have to be really disgusted with the way things are in this world, motivated to set out on the Christian way. Let's be honest with ourselves and with each other – the next election really isn't going to make all that much difference. As long as we think that the next election will eliminate crime, that the next political party won't be made up of those who lie, that there is a scientific breakthrough that is about to save the environment, or that one or more pay raises is going to solve all our problems – we have to be honest. As long as we think those things we're not ready for the journey of faith. We're not ready for the new world of grace.

Here in Psalm 120 there is a pilgrim on the journey to Jerusalem who is sick of the lies and tired of the deceit. It's not a psalm that is really a beautiful song. It's kind of harsh, distorted. But it

does get us started on the journey. “In my distress” is the opening phrase, and “war” is the last word. Not a happy song, but an honest and a necessary one.

Yes, on that beginning of the Christian journey we realize that we are surrounded by liars and drowning in lies. “Deliver me, O Lord, from the lying lips and the deceitful tongues.” The lies of advertisers who claim to know what I need and what I desire. The lies of entertainers who promise a cheap way to joy. The lies of politicians who pretend to instruct me in power and morality. The lies of the psychologists who offer to shape my behavior and my morals so I will live long and happy and successful. The lies of religionists who “heal the wounds of His people lightly.” From the lies of pastors who leave the commandments of God and begin to tickle the ears of men. Father, I am drowning in a sea of lies. Deliver me.

I was sharing the gospel with a second grader in my office. We were talking about what sin was. Every time I asked her what a sin was, she said that it was lying, it wasn't telling the truth. I tried to get her to see that sin was sometimes made up of our actions, and not just lying. But then I had to say to her, “You have made a very interesting point.” Sin – all sin – begins with lying. Satan is the father of lies, and the first sin was evoked by the lie of Satan that, indeed, if they ate the forbidden fruit they would become like God when, in fact, it meant they would surely die. All sin finds its root in lying lips and in deceitful tongues.

Father, get me away from the lies and let me hear the truth – the truth that you love me, the truth that you love the one sitting beside me, the truth that our problems are because we, ourselves, have broken the world, distorted your creation. The truth is that we are sinners, and the center of our lives and our history must be Jesus Christ – crucified for our sins, raised from the tomb for our salvation. We participate in a new life as we believe in Him, accept His mercy, respond to His love, and obey His commands.

John Baillie wrote, “I am sure that the bit of the road that most requires to be illuminated is the point where it forks.” The psalmist on his journey to Jerusalem is at the crossroads. He is thinking about the life without the journey of faith and the life now that he has begun the journey to Jerusalem.

In verses 3 and 4, God answers the psalmist's cry.

What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you false tongue?

He gains their attention and prepares them for His answer – and it's a harsh one. The liar, represented by the false tongue, will receive the sharp arrows of the warrior and the coals of the broom tree.

The warrior is God Himself, and He answers the psalmist's request. He will bring His arrows down upon those who lie to us. And the liar will be burned with the fiery coals of the broom tree.

Like the psalmist, when we're caught in the web of the world's deceit, we pray to God to break it. We ask Him to remove the confusion and assume His control. We call for His arrows and coals, and His justice is sure, for no liar will enter His Kingdom.

The psalmist continues. “Woe is me, for I sojourn in Meshech, and dwell among the tents of Kedar. Too long has my soul had its dwelling with those who hate peace.”

These are place names. Meshech is a far-off tribe, thousands of miles from Palestine in southern Russia. Kedar is a wandering Bedouin tribe with a barbaric reputation among Israel’s borders. They represent the savage and the hostile. You might say it this way: I live in the midst of hoodlums and wild savages. This world is not my home, and I want to journey to Jerusalem.

II. When we say no to the lies of the world and yes to God’s truth, that is when we repent (v. 5-7).

Yes, this first psalm, this beginning of the journey is a call to repentance.

Repent is always and everywhere the first word in the Christian life. When John the Baptist came preaching, he preached “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Jesus’ first preaching was the word “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Peter, after he preached his first sermon, said, “Repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). In the last book of the Bible, the message to the seventh church is “be zealous and repent” (Revelation 3:19).

There is a distinct difference between repentance and cover-up.

While traveling on business, an executive had a very bad experience at one particular hotel. He climbed in the bed, and a bug started racing up his leg. He jumped from the bed, turned on the light, and threw back the covers. The bug wasn’t alone. He had a lot of partners – numerous critters between the sheets. Although the man was given another room, he was not satisfied with the situation. Upon returning home, he wrote a letter to the hotel’s corporate office. Within a few weeks, he received a letter directly from the company’s president. With flattering remarks and penitent words, the president made it quite clear that the problem should have never occurred and he would make sure it wouldn’t happen again. Most of us just want to be heard, and the businessman felt somewhat vindicated by the letter, until a small post-it note fell from the envelope. The secretary had inadvertently left her boss’s directives on the reply. The little note simply said, “Send this man the bug letter.” (*Home Life*, February 1997)

It’s not repentance when we just try to cover our tracks after getting caught. Repentance involves a commitment to correct our ways, to change, to head a new direction, to begin journeying not with a world full of lies but, rather, toward Jerusalem.

Repentance is not so much an emotion, just feeling sorry for your sins. Rather, it’s a decision. It’s when you and I decide we have been wrong in imagining that we know the right way, that we can manage our own lives, that we know what’s right. It’s a decision to leave a world of lies and the lies of the world. It’s repenting of the decision that you can be your own God. It’s repentance of the fact that you thought that one day you’d get enough money or enough education or enough success and power to do life on your own. It’s deciding that the world has been telling you a pack of lies and selling you a bill of goods. It’s turning around and deciding that what God has done in Jesus Christ is really the truth.

We repent when we realize that we will never do what God expects of us, and God will never do what we expect of Him if we keep believing the same lies and thinking the same thoughts. Repentance is a decision to follow Christ and become His pilgrim in the path of peace.

Psalm 130, also a Psalm of Ascent:

The psalmist, as he suffers, realizes he must cry out to God, then he realizes he has no right to speak to someone who is holy, since he is so sinful. But then he says, “Lord, if you really kept up with our iniquities, who could stand?” And he knows that God is forgiving and merciful. And God is. Not because sin’s no big deal, but because Christ has already paid for our sin on the cross. And He who says, “Neither do I condemn thee,” has paid with His very blood, that we can be forgiven.

These people who are marching, these Hebrews who are singing the Songs of Ascent, had their whole history set in motion by those who rejected their present worlds: Abraham, who rejected Mesopotamia because of God’s call to journey on, and Moses who rejected Egypt because of God’s call to journey out.

Some of the most fascinating pages of American history of those stories of the immigrants who came to the shores of this country in the 19th century – thousands upon thousands of people whose lives in Europe had become mean and poor, persecuted and wretched. They left. They had heard of a place where a new start could be made. They got reports of a land where the environment was a challenge instead of an oppression. The stories continue to be told in family after family, keeping alive the memory of the event that made an American out of what was once a German or an Italian or a Scot.

“Woe to me,” says the Israelite as he journeys. “I have been too long in Meshech and too long in the tents of Kedar. Too long has my soul had its dwelling among those who hate peace.”

We don’t have to live there any longer. Repent. Repentance. The first word, as Eugene Peterson says, in Christian immigration. It sets us on the way of traveling the right way.

Lord, deliver us from the ways of this world. Help us as we, like the pilgrims of ancient Israel journeyed the way to Jerusalem, journey the way of God.

There are some of you here today, and you’re sick of the lies of the world. You’re sick of the ways of the wicked. Today the pilgrims call, even as they sing along their journey, “Come and join us. Won’t you come and repent of the ways of the world? Repent of your own sin? Won’t you leave the tents of Kedar? Won’t you abandon Meshech?” Won’t you journey to Jerusalem as we sing the Songs of Ascent.