

Crying to a Listening God

Have Mercy

Reading: **Psalm 123**

INTRODUCTION – New World

Good Morning/Evening, I'm Pastor /Father Geoff.

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

All restrictions on religious gatherings have been lifted.

I have had both vaccination doses, as has Sharon.

Our daughters have each had their first one and we're waiting for their call-up for the second.

Very soon, as the vaccination roll-out gets through everyone, we will be back to normal.

Are you ready to get back to normal?

- Are you ready to walk around without a mask?
- Are you ready to stop sanitizing your hands multiple times a day?
- Are you ready to hug somebody ... anybody?
- Are you ready for full social re-engagement?

For some, the answer to all of these is "yes," but a fair number of people are not so sure.

There is a lot of readjusting to do, and the new normal will not be the same as the old.

We are re-entering a new world, a changed world, a different world.

And where is God in the midst of all this?

Where does God fit into all the questions I just asked about returning to normal?

How much is He influencing your answers.

Today we **begin our summer series in the Psalms** because perhaps no part of the Bible is better suited to expressing what we feel about the past year and a half or the coming year and a half.

The Psalms **give us space, to remember, rejoice, repent, re-focus.**

They help us lament and cry out, to be thankful and rejoice, to rededicate ourselves, our priorities and our newly forming habits to God.

We will get there today, but it is **worth taking a moment to take stock, evaluate,** acknowledge where we are and what is going on in us and around us.

I want to start with this – a changed world – then I will talk about plans for what lies ahead for us as a community and to acknowledge the challenges we face.

Only then can we come to Psalm 123 and engage with the lament as individuals and as a community.

1. A New World

Nicolas Christakis a sociologist at Yale University has already identified three trends that will result from the pandemic, they are similar to trends that followed previous pandemics (esp. the 1918 Spanish Flu):

- **As a result of the threat** people generally accept a **growth in state power**. The state supported most of the population financially, set the rules for the lockdowns and organized the vaccination development and roll-out. People are looking to the state to drive the recovery and set the trends.
- As a **result of the disruption** there has been a significant increase in the **search for meaning**. According to polls done by the Economist, 20% of people in Italy and The Netherlands see an increasing interest in religion in their nation. For Spain and Canada 40% of people do. But this is not all. This search for meaning is also reinforcing the rise of identity politics which will increase polarization of citizens on the left and right.
- As a result of the **closeness of death** there is predicted to be an increase in **risk taking behaviour and audacity**. It may not happen, but commonly in history when people believe they've cheated death they become more reckless. After

the Spanish flu people sought excitement in increased sexual license, new trends in art and fashion, and a craze for speed and pushing the limits. How this may be expressed now is yet to be determined.

Each one of these trends is both an opportunity and a threat to our own spirituality and to the spread of the Gospel.

- If state power joins forces with identity politics advocates we may be squeezed, but if religion is seen as part of the solution to the trials of life we may find governments more open to our input and supportive of our social ministries.
- If we get on the thrill bandwagon some of us may be enticed down paths towards emotive and spiritual extremes or we may become bolder witnesses for Christ in spite of opposition.
- If we are ready to meet the social and spiritual needs of people coming out of the lockdown with a sensitivity to their anxieties and concerns we may have amazing opportunities to make God known to people who are searching and to offer them a welcoming home in the church.

In all of this we first have to deal with our own issues from what we have been through.

The church has also been monitoring internal trends amongst Christians and organizations like the Barna Group have been tracking the trends.

Thanks to the lockdown there have been many free or low-cost pastors' conferences and workshops discussing the post pandemic church.

- At this point it seems that most churches that are surviving the disruption of the pandemic have retained about 60% of their membership. 40% of people have either stopped attending church, or are attending an alternative online option, or have moved to a different church.
- What has become abundantly clear is that the vast majority of evangelical Christians have no idea what the church is. They have no idea why 'going to church' matters, they don't know how the church fits into the salvation plan of God, and most have a very disembodied, individualistic and consumeristic attitude towards their spiritual lives.
 - Just take one example. How do most Christians decide which church to attend? Do they go to the church they like? Or do they go where they

prayerfully discerned God wanted them, even if they didn't like the church, or it didn't meet all their spiritual needs?

- I was at a pastors' conference two weeks ago and the message, based on the research, is that the **number one task of evangelical pastors is to teach ecclesiology** (that's the theology of church). Why does it exist? What is it for? How do I fit into it? The difficulty is that many churches in their very structure already embody individualistic and consumerist tendencies. They try to give people what they want – it is often hidden behind phrases like making church “welcoming” and “accessible.” Important as those things are, there are other things that come first.

There is obviously much more I could say about these things but I want to move on to talk about us.

Where are we at as a community and what lies ahead as far as we know.

2. Church in a New World

The changes of the pandemic have and will impact us just like everyone else.

Fortunately, by God's grace, it seems we have survived well we cannot yet say how many of us will return or what our financial position may be in 6 or 12 months from now, but **we have survived, and in some ways even thrived.**

Our online service has kept us in touch.

In the breakout rooms after the service new friendships have formed and we've got to know each other a bit better.

I want to thank the staff team for the job they did.

Dan did a ton of work to help us use the technology well and to be able to worship together while we were physically apart.

Martin & Pearl worked behind the scenes every Sunday to make sure everything held together.

Karen, also invested time and resources in making the service what it is/was.

We have been working behind the scenes to prepare and plan for the end of the pandemic.

I want to mention **some of the important developments & plans:**

- We have a huge **new sign on the wall facing the street**. If you haven't been out this way in the past few months take a drive and have a look.
- The Regent Exchange team will be sharing soon about the plans to make our building and grounds a powerful tool for ministry as the tenants for first high-rise across the street move in in September.
- We will be launching a **capital campaign to renovate the main washrooms**. Please start praying about whether God wants you to contribute. We have some funds in the capital account but we need to raise about \$20 - \$30,000 more. It would be great to have them done before the big bang in September when UBC and Regent start with full in-person classes again.
- We are busy with the planning and preparation to launch **a Mandarin (Chinese) service to run concurrently with our 10am service** in September. They will meet in the Prayer Chapel as the English service meets in the Sanctuary. All children will be in the same Sunday School and Youth and we'll be able to fellowship together before and after the service. We want to be sure that we build the unity that is so essential to its success.
- We will have a major drive to renew and expand our **home group ministry**.
- The **neighbourhood ministry of the vegetable garden boxes** is going to get new emphasis as people across the street are invited to have a box and join in the fellowship around planting, caring for and harvesting their vegetables.
- We will re-launch **in-person ESL classes** to tandem with the Mandarin service and the Korean ministry.
- We will be launching **basic catechism discipleship classes** to make up for the deficiencies in understanding of what it means to be a Christian as part of the Body of Christ on earth – the church. If you are not 100% clear on the meaning, purpose and value of the Nicene Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the church and spiritual formation then it's highly recommended.

All our general ministries continue or re-start and we're looking at community events that will help us welcome and connect with our new neighbours – like the Barn Dance in October.

Please **be praying for how God grows us, uses us, and blesses us** into the future and what role he has for you in it as you make adjustments to this post-pandemic world.

We will be continuing our current hybrid in-person online service but the online option will eventually fall away.

We want to be sure to give everyone time to adjust back but at some point we will embrace the relevance and necessity of our physical presence and engagement with the physical world as we have been exploring in our recent series on One Sacred World.

There is much to think and pray about, which brings us to Psalm 123.

3. Psalm 123 – Where to Look

I'm sure when the psalm was announced **did you think of Psalm 23** – “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want” – only to discover that Psalm 123 was different.

I kept getting confused myself.

And if you're asking **why we're doing such an unusual Psalm** at the start of a series in the Psalms, the first reason is that it is the one in the lectionary for this Sunday.

Initially I thought I'd do something else because it is so short and unknown, but as I sat with it a bit, considering what other Psalm might be better, I realized that **this is a perfect Psalm for what I have just said**.

It is a Psalm of **individual and community lament** in the series of **psalms called the “Psalms of Ascent” (Ps 120 – 134)**.

These were used by Israelite pilgrims as they made their way to the temple in Jerusalem, which is at the top of My Zion, shaped like a V with a valley on each side.

As the pilgrims made their way up the long slope to the temple they sang or recited the Psalms of Ascent.

We do not know any details of when or why Psalm 123 was written other than that it clearly relates to a season of oppression and hardship when the people desperately needed God's rescue and help.

In the midst of this hardship, the first section (vv 1-2) is an inclusio bracketed by the words – "To you I lift up my eyes" (v 1) and "our eyes look to the Lord" (v 2).

There is only one point in the two verses – we look to God.

We look to him like a servant looks for mercy and grace from their master.

And we keep looking "until" God has mercy on us (v 2).

In the Second section (v 3-4) the need for mercy has arisen because of hardship.

The people have experienced contempt and scorn until they are full of it.

In the context of the Psalm it suggest a time of oppression and persecution, but the principle remains the same for any kind of hardship.

Our hardship has been the disruption, isolation and the difficulties of the pandemic but as we come out of it our cry is the same – "have mercy."

We are at a critical point as each of us decides how we move forward ourselves and as a community.

Have mercy.

O Lord come and deliver us. Come and guide us.

Come and protect us from going astray, from being bullied or enticed down unhealthy or sinful paths.

The very essence of this rescue is to consider where our eyes are looking.

We must lift our eyes to the Lord.

If we look at our circumstances, if we focus on our wants, our uncertainties, our fears, our desires, our solutions we may go badly astray.

"So our eyes look to the Lord our God , until he has mercy upon us." (v 2)

As we try to figure out what life is going to look like for each of us, we remember that **God is the one who knows.**

He is the one who has plans for us and who wants to rescue us and pour his mercy down upon us.

It is to him that we must look, knowing that **his ways are perfect, and his will is good.** It's that simple.

Let's talk briefly about living it.

LIVING IT –

We have some plans – both personally and communally – but we're also a bit **uncertain about what the future holds.**

There is a real opportunity for us to set our lives on a new, or adjusted, path.

Since **everyone and everything is changing, we can change too.**

It may happen by accident and by force of circumstance, or it can happen intentionally and purposefully.

First, **we look to God as our point of reference.**

What is He doing? What does he want? **How do I walk in step with the spirit?**

It is worth taking time to seek these answers.

Please feel free to come and speak to me and we can pray together.

Join our devotional ministries on weekday mornings at 8am and/or evenings at 9pm.

Look to the Lord and wait on him.

Be in prayer for yourself and your family, for us as a community and what God wants for and from us, and pray **for our nation and the world** as new trends are set and new agendas come to the fore.

May God's will be done!