

Psalm 108

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Jenni Bales

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A Story of Hope and Endurance

Good morning! For those who don't know me, I've been a minister member of the Presbytery since my ordination in 2012. I've been called to a couple of chaplaincy positions. I also pastored a small church in our Presbytery for a few years.

For those who do know me, my husband and I are moving at the end of the month to Salem, Oregon to be near my family. We've decided it's time. We bought a home there last summer. So, we are in the throes of an interstate move. Today will be goodbye to you all in some respects.

I also just got back a little over a week ago from a trip to Scotland and Ireland with a friend of mine. One of the places she and I stayed was in an old abbey on the Isle of Iona, which is in the Hebrides Islands off the northwest coast of Scotland. The abbey was established in the 6th century by a monk called St. Columba from Ireland.

Iona is an interesting island. There's a cemetery next to the abbey with a little chapel. It's a famous cemetery as various people of importance such as ancient kings, warriors, and gentry have been buried there. Iona is called a "thin" place, meaning the veil between heaven and earth is believed to be thinner than in other places. Being buried there meant you were just a little closer to heaven when the time came. It seems to be in practice some kind of insurance policy to help things move along when entering the afterlife.

Because so many peoples' remains have been transported there, there was a pilgrimage road created called the Road of the Dead that starts at the nearby bay and ends at the abbey. Here are a few pictures of the bay, abbey, cemetery, and cobblestones of the pilgrim road. I was able to walk on those cobblestones myself.

Being in the midst of a personal pilgrimage of sorts, I had that on the brain when I looked at our Psalm for today. In my opinion, Psalm 108 has within it two different pilgrimage stories, two different journeys. One pilgrim is full of confidence and the other seems to be processing doubt. But I believe both experiences eventually arrive at the same place, looking to God for deliverance. Reading the two journeys together also creates an interesting dynamic. Perhaps we experience both approaches simultaneously in different moments. Note that the doubt is not condemned or dismissed. It's folded into what is happening.

Pastor Fred also mentioned he's been preaching on Psalms this summer. I'm sure he's told you that the Psalms are Hebrew poetry, and Hebrew poetry is constructed with supportive ideas that build line by line in different ways. It's not an art form of rhyming. And often these supporting lines eventually build to a central idea, and then descend again.

The Psalms also tell a story written by the Psalmist. Many of them start off with the Psalmist in trouble, they then have some sort of encounter with God, and then their sorrow turns to joy.

There are also many requests for God to smite one's enemies. That's an interesting sermon topic in and of itself.

The Psalms also express joy, gratitude, sadness, and depression; the whole range of human emotions. They give us language and guidance for our own prayers. We're meant to see ourselves in them and identify with the feelings behind what's happening. And, as many of them are a bit ambiguous about their context, it allows ongoing generations find applications in them.

In our particular Psalm today, we are given the confident pilgrimage first in verses 1-6, and then the doubting one in verses 7-13. So, let's unpack these sections together ...

Our first section, the one which exudes confidence, sort of pushes God into the desired response. The Psalmist points out that they've been singing God's praises among the nations, which is a unique audience and platform. They aren't just speaking to their next-door neighbor. They have the ear of the surrounding people who don't follow the God of the Israelites.

This pilgrim believes God to be faithful with an unfaltering love. God has a responsibility to live up to hype and expectations, and the Psalmist is confident God will come through based on past experience.

How many of you have used encouragement to prompt someone else towards a goal? You know they're capable of completing the task, but maybe they're experiencing some self-doubt. Your encouragement and belief in their abilities helps get them over the finish line. Or maybe, someone has played that role in your life. We all need a cheering section from time to time.

If I may, one of my core memories from childhood was the test of whether or not I could tie my own shoes. My kindergarten teacher had a large Mother Goose looking shoe in the classroom that each of us had to tie by ourselves. I, of course, waited

until last as I had zero confidence I could do it. My turn finally came and I went to the front of the room with so much anxiety inside me. It was one of those moment where the room appeared to stretch and it took forever to walk over to the shoe. My teacher said to try, so I did. And to my amazement, I had been watching others do it for so long, that I managed it on the first try. That was a feeling of success. I just needed a little prompting.

That's an easy example to use. As adults, the goals become much more difficult and much more critical to our family and community's well-being, and the environment may not always be a safe one. When have you experienced encouragement leading to success? Where do we need it today as a community?

I don't think God particularly needs a cheering section, nor does he experience self-doubt, but there is something in the personal exchange that makes God a little more accessible, a little more human. It's as if the Psalmist is saying, "We believe in you God! We know you can make a difference. We know your love to be unconditional and real, and your loyalty never falters. We're going to trust that you will come through for us in this moment."

It's an invitation for God to engage with us. We know God is sovereign in the heavenly places, we need to see that sovereignty at work here on earth too. People around us have tried to supplant God with their own power. We need God to show up.

Moving on, verse 6 has an interesting phrase in it too. It mentions victory with God's right hand. One commentator I follow believes references to God's right hand are a way that the OT writers describe the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit functions as the means for God's deliverance to become a reality. In this case, the writer is expecting the Holy Spirit's work to lead to someone's rescue in a difficult situation.

What challenges are you facing as individuals and as Stone Church? Has God been invited to show up? Are you confident in God's love for you, His faithfulness in your life, and your community's life?

We also know that even with an invitation, God doesn't show up the way we would like in various situations. We don't always experience a happy ending.

Are we confident in God's deliverance when our neighbors are undeservedly arrested by ICE, detained, and then deported leaving grief, loss, and hardship in their wake? What does our faith in God look like in those circumstances?

Or perhaps we are losing or have lost someone to disease and death. God could've brought healing. Where was God's faithfulness in that situation?

I don't know the challenges or transitions each of you face in life. I'm sure there's a long list of reasons to doubt God's love. Perhaps the second part of our Psalm fills that gap, when God doesn't show up in the ways we expect him to. We end up calling out to God with doubt.

We then transition to the second half of our Psalm starting in verse 7, which takes the road of doubt. Rather than approaching God with the confidence of past experience, the author challenges God to live up to his promises to his people. The Psalmist uses prayer to approach God as God's promises lay unfulfilled in the moment.

The Psalm then mentions various geographical places like Shechem, Gilead, and Judah. All together, these areas represent the whole of the Promised Land. A warrior motif is also introduced which includes a helmet, scepter, a washbasin, and a shoe being thrown. The warrior is described in such a way that we know they were successful in battle. He's taking his helmet off and laying his scepter down. He's cleaning off the grime of battle with his washbasin, and kicking his shoes off as the battle is over and it's time to rest.

In verse 10, God the warrior then continues to speak and expresses that he's still looking for a fight. Who will show him the way to the next battle?

The narrative then switches back to the Psalmist and the reason for challenging God. God appears to actually be missing when needed in battle. Perhaps he has even rejected his people. God is being driven to answer as his promises are not being met. Human effort cannot make up for God's absence.

The Psalm then closes with the doubting pilgrim's statement of faith. *With God we shall do valiantly; it is he who will tread down our foes.* The confidence comes, but only after the doubt in God's ability to show up has been spoken and processed. Between these two approaches, the bottom line is that God has made commitments to his people which should make a difference in this life we're experiencing here and now. When it does not feel like God is present and acting on our behalf, we face God and confront him with the gap between his faithfulness and our reality. It doesn't matter if we're confident in our faith or doubting. It's a call to prayer.

In closing, back on Iona, the monks that lived in the abbey eventually created what is called the Book of Kells in the 8th century. It's a copy of the four Gospels in Latin, but what's unique about it is the artistry that illuminates the text. Certain letters are

drawn in a way that's more than just calligraphy. There are fanciful creatures drawn in the margins and more realistic ones, like housecats that show up in various places. It was the work that started the movement to add art and stylization to the biblical text. Its original cover was made with embedded jewels.

Because of ongoing and violent Viking raids, the decision was made to take the book to Ireland, sailing over rough open water to get there. The book was saved and eventually made its way to Trinity College in Dublin in the 1700s, where I got to see it in person.

But, the Abbey on Iona remained. It was founded in the 6th Century and survived the brutal Hebrides weather, Viking raids, the challenges of Medieval Europe, the Protestant Reformation where Catholicism was outlawed and/or destroyed in Great Britain, and finally into the Victorian and modern age. Pilgrims still visit the grounds and stay there.

There were seasons in the Abbey's life where it felt like God was absent. Monks and nuns, called to God's purposes cried out asking for deliverance and direction. Many lost their lives, particularly during the Viking era of pillaging and the destruction accompanying the Protestant Reformation. But it's a building, a cultural movement, and a faith that has stood the test of time. God's presence remains. There's an amazing view with the big picture you don't see in the midst of the difficult and traumatic moments.

So, to wrap things up, our Psalm today highlights two pilgrimages in approaching God for salvation. The first is with confidence, pushing God to fulfill his promises of faithfulness.

A battle is fought and the warrior is successful and ready for the next fight, but the second pilgrim only feels God's absence. God isn't showing up and meeting expectations. However, even with all their doubt, this pilgrim comes to the conclusion that God will save the day.

Seeing this faith and this doubt held simultaneously, we know that when it doesn't feel like God is showing up in the way we need him to, that we can confront God and talk to him about the gap between his power and our reality. It's a call to prayer. And, hopefully, you've enjoyed the few pictures of Iona. It's a long journey to get there involving planes, trains, automobiles, ferries, and buses, but the experience is worth it.

So, as you go about your week and find yourself facing various challenges, may you feel affirmed in your faith and affirmed in your doubt knowing that both pilgrimages have a way of encountering God.

Amen