

**Psalm 120**  
**Choosing to be Disciples of Jesus Christ**  
**a series on discipleship**

**Michelle Drewitz**  
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**Riverdale Baptist Church**  
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As a church, we are in the midst of a transition. There is grief that comes with the retirement of a beloved pastor for many years. There is loss that comes with acknowledging the way things once were are beginning to change. There is expectation that comes with looking ahead and anticipating what is to come. There is hope that comes with being the people of God. There is curiosity and wonder that comes with change. There is anxiety that comes with uncertainty. We are in an in-between time.

The world teaches us that when we are in an in-between time, when there is change, when there is grief and loss, when there is hope and expectation, then whatever we want can be obtained immediately. The world teaches that when there is something that disrupts the comfort of our lives, it can be 'fixed' right away. In other words, the world teaches instant gratification: if we want something, we can get it right away. No longer does a person need to actually wait for the next TV episode to come out, you can watch it all on Netflix. No longer do you need to wait because you don't have the money to buy that new item of clothing or sports equipment or building material. You can put it on your credit card and pay it later. No longer do you need to wait an hour for a meal, you can buy it at the drive-through. No longer do you need to wait to communicate with someone – snapchat, Instagram, text messaging, twitter or facebook messenger all make that instantaneous. The discipline of waiting is forgotten, replaced instead by the assumption that if something can be done, it can be done immediately and properly.

There is a danger in bringing that same mindset into the Christian life. There is danger in understanding that God's movements in the life of the church and the life of an individual believer are always swift and quick. There is danger in assuming that the goal of our salvation,

Christian maturity, happens right away, with ease and efficiency. There is danger in approaching a pastoral search from the instant gratification mindset. There is a danger in the church portraying the Christian life to be about an immediate fix to one's problems.

In North America, there is a growing trend to develop the most attractive and appealing church experience, so that God and church grab someone's attention. In a time where so much demands our attention, and we seem to have decreasing attention spans, it is not so hard to get someone to pay attention to the gospel. But it is significantly harder to sustain attentiveness to the gospel over years. In this regard, religion has become somewhat of a tourist attraction: people go to church, maybe weekly, maybe monthly. They go to special events like retreats and conferences. The church leader functions like a tour guide because s/he is the new personality, the new experience, the new that everyone wants to see and hear. But as soon as something else that's new and flashy and desirable comes along, we are quick to discard the old and embrace the new because it's what I want.

But the Christian faith is not a tourist attraction, a momentary or occasional stop along the road of life. It isn't something that's instagrammed or tweeted, it's not something you try just so you get likes on your fb post. The Christian faith rubs against culture's approach to life, to relationships, to identity, to character formation. The Christian life is not so much about embracing the latest and the greatest, the most attractive 'tourist site or tour guide' so much as it is about a patient and steadfast development of virtue. It is about a faithful pursuit of holiness and righteousness.

What is the purpose of the Christian life? What is the direction of the body of believers – the church? The Christian life is, ultimately, about an entire lifetime devoted to discipleship. It is about devotion to the King – Jesus Christ. It is about participating in the Kingdom – commitment to and involvement in the church. It is about developing the qualities and attributes needed to live in the Kingdom. Discipleship is anything but instant. Discipleship is about being a disciple and being a pilgrim. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means that we spend our entire lives learning from our master, Jesus Christ. It isn't about acquiring information about God but developing the skills, the disciplines, the practices of faith. To be a pilgrim means to be a person who is on a path somewhere, who is on a direction, who is going someplace. The Christian is someone who spends their life going to God. The Christian is someone who knows that the only way to go to God is through Jesus Christ.

It is not the job of the pastor to meet all your needs or to fix your problems instantly. It is my job to point you to God, to show you the path, to walk with you on the path. It is my job to pray for you so that God would give you the perseverance needed to pursue God in the midst of all that threatens to tear us from God. It is my job to be a disciple and a pilgrim with you. It is my job to train and equip you in the way of discipleship and pilgrimage. And so, in the coming weeks and months throughout the fall season, I will turn to that ancient songbook, the Psalms, to help us think about what discipleship is all about; to help give us the skills and tools we need to stop, to wait, to listen, to push against the world's demands of immediacy and efficiency and instead go to God.

The Songs of Ascent, found in Psalm 120-134 are 15 songs that were likely sung when the people of Israel journeyed up to Jerusalem for their annual worship festivals. This was the collection of songs that the pilgrims proclaimed as they traveled to Jerusalem to be at the great feasts. Over time, the songs of ascent were regarded as a handbook of devotions for pilgrims.

The Israelites made that pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year to celebrate a festival. In Exodus 23, God gave his people instruction about the journey and about the festivals. The three festivals included the Feast of unleavened bread in the spring which was to remember the exodus, the time when God saved his people and brought them out of slavery and bondage. The feast of harvest in early summer celebrated the first fruits of the crops. And the feast of ingathering in autumn celebrated the gathering of all the crops. So three times a year, faithful Hebrews journeyed to Jerusalem to renew their commitment as the covenanted people of God. Geographically, Jerusalem is the highest city in Palestine. So the songs of ascent are literal in that it refers to the ascent or climb up to Jerusalem. And the songs of ascent are spiritual in that it refers to living a life that moves toward God.

Now, you and I don't make an annual pilgrimage and we don't travel to Jerusalem three times a year for a festival so how can these Psalms help us? How are they relevant to our own lives today? If we learn to understand our Christian life, both individually and as a church body, to be a pilgrimage, then these Psalms will help us. If we learn to adopt an identity of being a pilgrim, of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, then these Psalms will help us.

After all, the journey up to Jerusalem three times a year reminded the people of their identity as the people of God: redeemed, commanded, covenanted, blessed, saved. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem reminded the people how their daily, mundane, and routine lives were to be lived: as disciples. So a picture emerges: in the daily grind of living and working – whether it be farming, carpentry, teaching children, nursing wounds, administrating order, overseeing resources; in the daily grind of caring for one another – looking after aged parents, keeping track of wandering children; in the daily grind of maintaining a home – cleaning, cooking, gardening, building, repairing – in these daily, routine, monotonous tasks the people of God lived as disciples. Three times a year, they left their routines, they left their farms and homes, they left towns and villages and cities, to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem where there they would sing the Songs of Ascent: songs that reinforced their collective identity and collective purpose. The Songs of Ascent help us remember who we are and where we are going.

We are all going somewhere. The Bible often describes that journey as a pilgrimage. Consider, for example, Hebrews 11. The writer of Hebrews describes in that chapter what faith means. Using the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as an example, the writer articulates their faith. Then he summarizes in verses 13-14: *All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.* You see, it is not so much about what a person understands or holds on to as what a person seeks and pursues. Like Hebrews reminds us, sometimes we don't actually obtain what we want – we don't receive the promises – but what is more important than getting what we want is having and pursuing a proper vision.

And so these Songs are so important, so encouraging, so helpful, so needed in times of transition. They are sung during the in-between times because they are songs that remind us who we are and where we're going – where we ought to put our focus. These are the songs that are sung when courage, support, direction, and vision are needed.

In the first Song of Ascents, Psalm 120, we are immediately reminded of our own identity in relation to the world. The Psalm begins “I call on the Lord in my distress, and he answers me. Save me, O Lord, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues”. We are reminded that we live in a world where we question if we can trust what we hear. Fake News permeates twitter feeds and headlines. We live in a world where we cannot trust people we meet. There are scams to get our money, there is deception and betrayal and lies. But not only do we hear lies, we are also guilty of speaking lies. The lies the Psalmist refers to can be lies others say or lies the Psalmist says. We pray to be saved and delivered from others' deception and lies just as we pray to be delivered from our desire to lie, from our desire to deceive and hurt others.

So the first cry of the Song of Ascent is one of distress, disgust, anguish, trouble. There is a lot that causes distress for the Psalmist. In verse 2, we read about the disgust because of lies and deception. In verse 5, we read about the anguish and sorrow because the Psalmist lives in Meshech, among those of Kedar – people groups who are violent, barbaric, ruthless, and evil. In verse 7, we read about the distress because the Psalmist seeks peace but experiences only war. There isn't much elaboration, but what the Psalmist provides is clear enough. The Psalmist is distressed and disgusted at the way the world is. The world is no longer the nice place the Psalmist envisioned. People are no longer as nice as once thought or hoped.

But look again at the Psalmist's cry. Yes, it is a cry that expresses distress, disgust, anguish, and sorrow because of the lies, deception, betrayal. But the cry does not stop there. The Psalmist does not leave it at grumbling or complaining or bemoaning what is reality. The cry goes deeper, it reaches farther, it pushes to another level. The cry expresses great dissatisfaction with the ways of the world but it goes deeper because it expresses a yearning, a desire for something else. The cry exposes a choice. In those first two verses, we hear a cry of pursuit. We hear the pilgrim's cry. The Psalmist says "In my distress I cry to the Lord, that he may answer me: deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue".

The Psalmist has a choice. A person can choose to continue to believe and follow the lies of the world or pretend the lies are not in actual fact lies or continue to grumble and complain about the lies. Or someone can choose to turn away from the lies and move in another direction. The Psalmist, in those first two verses is declaring their choice. In those first two verses, the Psalmist brings God into consciousness, into awareness, into the conversation. In doing so, the Psalmist is choosing to turn away from the lies of the world and instead turn to God. So in that initial cry of trouble, of despair, of disgust, the Psalmist also cries out to God because the Psalmist knows that only a turning to God will be fruitful. Grumbling and complaining keep us trapped in the cycle of despair.

It is easy to conclude that the Christian pilgrimage is futile, is certain failure. We don't live in an ideal world, we live in a world of confusion and chaos. We don't live in a world of harmony, peace and security, we live in a world of division and dissension. So we are presented with a

choice. We can choose to go deeper into pessimism and darkness and defeat or we can choose that ancient spiritual discipline of pilgrimage and discipleship.

Even though Yahweh God is mentioned just twice, God is mentioned at the very beginning. The Psalmist knows that when God enters the conversation, lies are brought to light and truth is revealed. Truth about our identity is revealed: God created us and loves us. Truth about others is revealed: God created each person and loves each person and we are to treat them with love. Truth about the world is revealed: God created the world and provides for it. Truth about what's wrong is revealed: there is sin and people are choosing to live their lives without God. Truth about how to make things right is revealed: the path towards freedom and wholeness is Jesus. This is the disciple's choice when the disciple chooses God instead of the lies of the world.

So the first step of discipleship, the first step of the Christian's pilgrimage, is that which motivates and inspires us to turn away from the world and instead turn to the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Biblical word for that kind of turning to Jesus is repentance. Repentance isn't something that's particularly happy or joyous: after all the first words we read in the song is one of trouble and the last word is war. Repentance is harsh, it's chaos, it's full of disgust and despair and sorrow and distress. Repentance isn't necessarily dramatic or pretty. But it is needed for discipleship.

The first step of discipleship is repentance. Consider, for example, the first word in Jesus' gospel message. When Jesus began his public ministry, his first words were: "repent, for the Kingdom

of God is near". The first word from John the Baptist is repent. The first sermon by the Apostle Peter is repent. Discipleship begins with repentance.

What exactly is repentance? Well, let me tell you what it is not. Repentance is not an emotion. Repentance is not a feeling. Instead, repentance is a decision. It is a choice. It requires thought and direction and resolve.

Repentance is the decision to say no to the world. It is the decision that declares I have been wrong in believing that I can figure out my life by myself and be my own god. Repentance is concluding that I've been wrong in thinking I have inside of me whatever it takes to do it on my own. Repentance is deciding I've been told lies about myself, others and the world – I've been told that I can figure out life by myself, that I can be happy if I just do whatever I want, that I have the tools and strength in me to find fulfillment. These are lies because they forget to tell me about God. They don't tell me that God created me and loves me. They don't tell me that God is with me and I don't need to go through life alone. They don't tell me that God created each person or the whole world. Repentance is deciding that God, in Jesus Christ, is truth. Repentance is that decision that says I will turn around and follow Jesus Christ and be his disciple, his apprentice, a pilgrim on the path of peace. Repentance is practical: it is a practical act and a practical word.

When we say no to one way of life, we inevitably say yes to another way of life. That's repentance: saying no to the ways of the world and saying yes to following Jesus Christ.

Here's the thing. Repentance is actually a word, an act, a practice that is seeped deep in hope. It isn't something that's fraught with guilt or shame or failure or condemnation. The Psalmist was deep in the midst of chaos, in the midst of darkness, in the midst of trouble, in the midst of lies, in the midst of betrayal, in the midst of distress. Hope was found when the Psalmist turned to God. Hope was found when the Psalmist repented. So whenever we find ourselves or others living in distress, repentance becomes a beacon of hope, it reveals to us another way. There is a way out of distress and the way out is repentance, a turning to God. It is the way out because the way to peace is the way to God. Now of course Israel, who chose to say no to the lies of the world and instead say yes to God did not miraculously and suddenly live in pure joy and innocence and harmony and holiness. Discipleship and pilgrimage doesn't work that way. Israel lived and worked and played, suffered and sinned in the world in the same way that everyone else did and in the same way we Christians continue to do today.

The difference is that with repentance – with a turning to God, they now knew in what direction they were going; they were now going someplace – they were going to God. And so, in the midst of their living and playing and working, in the midst of their suffering and sinning, the truth of God gave them purpose, the forgiveness of God restored them and the love of God sustained them.

Many of us made a decision to be a disciple of Jesus Christ years or decades ago, when we were a child or a teenager. I remember the evening as a young girl that I asked my parents to come into my bedroom at bedtime and pray with me to accept Jesus Christ as my Saviour. It was a decision I made when I was 7 years old. But repentance was not a one-time decision. It is a

decision we need to make every day, during good times and challenging times. Faith, after all, like any relationship is extremely fragile and vulnerable. It is the same in marriage. When a couple makes their marriage vows to each other on their wedding day, it is not as though that decision to fulfill and obey those vows suddenly disappears after the wedding. Husband and wife must every day choose to uphold those vows otherwise the marriage can fall apart. It is the same in Christian discipleship. Every day, the Christian disciple chooses to be a pilgrim, on a path that leads ever closer to God.

Discipleship is a matter of faithful, committed obedience. It is a matter of choosing to repent and say yes to Jesus Christ. Discipleship is not instant, it is not immediate, it is not quick. It is slow work, but it is good work. The first step of discipleship and pilgrimage is repentance. It is the first step because it starts us on that journey that leads us to God. It is the first step because it reminds us who we are – we are loved and created by God to be in relationship with God. It is the first step because it reminds us where we are going – we are pursuing God.