

Here in This Place
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 16

- ¹ Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
- ² I say to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you.’
- ³ As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,
in whom is all my delight.
- ⁴ Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;
their drink-offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names upon my lips.
- ⁵ The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
- ⁶ The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.
- ⁷ I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.
- ⁸ I keep the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.
- ⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.
- ¹⁰ For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.
- ¹¹ You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

“You show me the path of life.” This psalm is considered a psalm of confidence because its overall theme is of trust in God. We can gather from the first line that the psalmist has known trouble: Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. What follows this trouble, in both chronological and literary fashion, is a singing of God’s praises. I’ve seen

and experienced hard things, God, and I bless you. This is the life of a believer, of one who has faith in God.

Joan S. Gray says, “Effective spiritual leaders are able to take the general principles of the faith, hold those up against the context in which they live, and ask, ‘What will it look like for us to be faithful to God in this place, at this time?’”¹ Having been in this world 170 years, our church has known trouble and we have kept praising God. What does it look like to be faithful to God in this place, at this time? What does it look like to move beyond our troubles and bless God in this place, at this time?

In this place and time, for many, many churches, we could name our greatest trouble as a societal and cultural movement away from church. That wouldn’t be untrue. But! But! But our reason for being is NOT to bring people to church. **Our reason for being is to bring church to people.** Our reason for being is to give the hungry food. Are there still hungry people needing to be fed in this place, at this time? Yes, in our backyard and in Venezuela² – they are all our brothers and sisters. Our reason for being is to give the thirsty something to drink. Are there still thirsty people in this place, at this time? Yes, in our backyard and in places like Flint – they are all our brothers and sisters.

Our reason for being is to welcome the stranger. Are there still strangers needing welcome in this place, at this time? Yes, in our backyard and in the bodies of Syrians seeking a place where they don’t fear for their lives – they are all our brothers and sisters. Our reason for being is to clothe the naked. Are there still people needing clothing in this place, at this time? Yes, in our backyard and Africa³ – they are all our brothers and sisters. Our reason for being is to care for the sick. Are there still sick people in this place, at this time? Yes, in our backyard and in Brazil⁴ – they are all our brothers and sisters. Our reason for being is to visit the imprisoned. Are there still people in prison in this place, at this time? Yes, in our backyard and across the globe – they are all our brothers and sisters.

¹ Joan S. Gray, *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A Handbook* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2009); p. 62.

² <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/06/20/482782426/as-food-crisis-worsens-venezuelans-loot-almost-empty-stores>

³ <https://www.gfmag.com/global-data/economic-data/the-poorest-countries-in-the-world?page=12>

⁴ <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/geo/>

We can bemoan that people don't seem to need church anymore but, if we answer the question "What will it look like for us to be faithful to God in this place, at this time?" then we must see the untruth in that statement. All around us there is work to be done in God's name. And, sure, some of that work happens in this building but, in a much greater proportion, the people needing the church are not in this building. Where we sit is a place – among many – to worship God. Where we sit is a place – among many – to discern where we are being called to feed, clothe, and visit. Where we sit is a place – among many – to plan how we bring drinks, offer welcome, and care for others.

It is who we are and how we go out into this world, into our context, that makes us the church, that makes us those who bless God, that brings us into God's presence. As the church we are the bearers of God's presence into the world, into our context. Professor Kimberly Bracken Long adds, "As the church we remind one another of God's faithfulness, even in the face of the Pit, upholding one another as we seek to live faithfully."⁵ Being hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, or imprisoned – these are some of the faces of the Pit, some forms of deep darkness. We are called to bear God's light in such darkness, not by passively inviting people to our refuge but by actively bringing our refuge to them.

The psalmist declares that in God's presence there is fullness of joy. What will it look like for us to spread the fullness of joy in this place, at this time? This is not a question to be answered once but a question to be asked daily. "This time" is ever-changing and, just as much, "this place." God is ever showing us the path of life, revealing it day by day; if we come back to our summer's sailboat metaphor, God is filling our sails and steering us in the smallest of increments – we may only see a day at a time but we trust that God has charted the full journey. We **could** name our greatest trouble as a societal and cultural movement away from church **or** we could hear the prophetic words of the newly elected Stated Clerk of our denomination, J. Herbert Nelson, who said, "We are not dead...we are alive, we are reforming, and we are transforming this world, one person at a time."⁶ We are needed still; our reasons for being remain, perhaps have even increased. And so we are not dead but

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, p. 385.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/jherbertnelsonii/posts/10208721059997641?pnref=story>

must be reforming for this context, this time, this place. God's winds are still blowing. It is the same Lord who gave counsel to the psalmist that gives us counsel today and it is the same Lord who is always before us, as before the psalmist. Let us bless God's holy name – thanks be to God!

Let us pray: Here in this place, you have called us to be light to humanity. Give us the courage to be your church, we pray. Amen.