

Pause with Pastor

November 5, 2020

Encouragement from the Psalms

Bret Rhoades

1. *Hasten, O God, to save me; O Lord, come quickly to help me.*
2. *May those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion;
may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace.*
3. *May those who say to me “Aha, Aha!” turn back because of their shame.*
4. *But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you;
may those who love your salvation always say “Let God be exalted!”*
5. *Yet I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God, you are my help and my deliverer;
O Lord, do not delay.*

Psalm 70

Each Sunday in worship, Pastor Panning identifies prayer requests. Each Sunday we hear prayers for those that are ill or suffering in some way, and as well, we hear of those that rejoice due to some blessing they have received – a new grandbaby, health restored, that sort of thing. And we pray for those individuals. And we pray for the church - our congregation as well as for all believers in the world. We also pray for the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the world that others may be brought to faith.

Psalm 70 is a prayer, a request for help. But it is not, first, for the congregation; it is not, first, for others; it is for David (or rather for me ... and for you). *“Hasten, O God, to save me; O Lord, come quickly to help me.”* Save me, help me. David is not asking that God help the nation of Israel; he is asking that God help him.

As individuals we all need help. And like David, we can go straight to the throne of God and say *Hasten, O God, to save me; O Lord, come quickly to help me.* As individuals, we also experience unfortunate, even devastating incidents in our lives. At these times there are those that feel we have received what we deserve, either because of our faith, our actions, or even our successes. Their, “Aha, Aha” (vs. 3) is just about as hateful as one can get. Can’t you just see someone pointing their finger at you with vengeance and evil in their eyes and say “Aha” ... not once, but twice. We are persecuted and mocked by society for our beliefs on life, on marriage, on societal norms; we are deemed deserving of the evil that befalls us.

But David does not remain focused exclusively on himself. At the end of vs. 3 he prays that his naysayers would experience shame. Shame, as compared to conceit, would be the first step toward confession and repentance. The desire is that this would ultimately lead to faith, so that even David’s enemies would then be included in those *“who seek you ..., love your salvation,”* and say, *“Let God be exalted!”* (Vs. 4). Even during times of persecution David prays for others, even his enemies. We are invited to do the same.

We are not alone. I belong to a church that does seek the Lord, a church that loves God’s salvation, a church that rejoices in being a part of the church invisible. We know that God is our constant companion, our help and our deliverer. We receive new tender mercies each and every day. We are blessed, for great is God’s faithfulness. So ... let us rejoice and be glad! Let us seek the Lord, let us love his salvation, and let us together say *“Let God be exalted!”*

Heavenly Father, we are thankful that we can boldly approach your throne, cry out to you and you hear our prayers. In these trying times we ask that you watch over us, protect us, but most of all help us to proclaim the Good News to all until you return. Come Lord Jesus, quickly come. Amen

Worship plans for Sunday, Nov. 8, 2020

Worship online at 9:00AM with parking lot distribution at 10:30AM

The forecast for Sunday calls for rain. So we will worship via Facebook Live. Due to the rain forecast, we will *not* offer parking lot distribution of The Lord's Supper.

♪... gettin' caught in the rain ...♪

Last Sunday we came up just 10 minutes short of getting away dry. Thanks to all who so quickly sprang into action to move our equipment inside. Because of your prompt and diligent response we suffered no damage. Everything is dry and working properly.

Update on Indoor Worship

With the uptick in the daily virus count we have had to back away from our anticipated November 1st return to the Sanctuary. This has raised the obvious and appropriate questions, "When will we return to worship indoors?" and "What criteria are we going to use to make the decision?"

Several factors are involved in making this decision:

- The risk to our members is increased as the 'community spread' increases. Since the virus can be carried and transmitted by a person before any symptoms are evident, we could all join in worship without realizing that one of us was infected. As the rate of infection in the county increases, the likelihood of one of us being infected increases, as does the risk of contaminating others in our worship space. We have already had at least 3 regular worshipers contract the virus. Fortunately, they were not in worship (either because they were traveling, or we had not recently had outdoor worship) when they were contagious. But we can see how easily we could have a bad situation if we return too early.
- Of course, people are often infected and contagious without any symptoms. Just hours ago I spoke with an Horry County couple who had contracted the virus while visiting family in VA. They were told by SC health officials that they could return to all their regular activities after 10 days of no symptoms, with no further testing. Yet, after 10 symptom-free days he still tested positive. They asked if they were still contagious. The official answer was, "probably not." This illustrates the vast uncertainty, even among professionals, regarding this virus. This is why measures such as masks and physical distancing are so important. We need to be aware that symptom-free does not mean virus-free. We must create safe seating and practices that do not assume the person next to us is not infected simply because they are not coughing and don't have a fever. So, as we move forward, it seems that we ought to err on the side of caution rather than try to justify pushing the envelope in the other direction.
- In addition to the objective facts (and conjectures of medical personnel), each of us has our own opinions on what is safe, which determines our willingness to gather in public. Given the quantity of unknowns, we must respect every member's right to their opinion and decisions. This diversity in perspectives gives rise to a whole set of challenges:
 - Some will join in every public worship service because they believe that is correct.
 - Some believe the risk is minimal or even non-existent.
 - Some will come infected because they have no symptoms; others will not recognize them, or think that their symptoms are unrelated to Covid.
 - Some will come to worship as soon as we open the doors because they trust that we would not begin indoor worship until it was absolutely safe.

Now, overlay a couple of the different perspectives above into one service and you can see the dilemma in trying to open safely.

- As we have discussed, our worship space is very small when compared to other Sanctuaries. We have become accustomed to it and don't often recognize how small it is. The attached picture is the Sanctuary of Mt. Olive Lutheran in Irmo, SC (Columbia). They have a capacity of 288 on the main floor (plus a small balcony). You can see they also have a very high ceiling, as well as a large area around the Chancel (front area around the altar). They also have a long, wide center aisle in addition to the side aisles.

They have closed every other pew and maintain spacing within the pews that do have seating. So they are able to easily have 100 people in worship and still be safe.

Mt. Olive can have 30% of their capacity in worship because the factors beyond simple seating allow for greater dispersion of any contaminants.

We can seat 125 if every chair is filled. And we do not have the extensive 'free' area that Mt. Olive has; neither do we have high ceilings. All of this contributes to a much higher concentration of any contaminants that may occur in our Sanctuary. Therefore our maximum seating during these times must be a smaller percentage than that of a Sanctuary such as the one pictured.



- Finally, we need at least a minimal number of trained individuals to staff our worship: besides an Elder we need a video tech and an audio tech. Very few of those who have been trained for these tasks have expressed an interest in returning at this point. If we don't have audio and video techs we cannot broadcast our services. That would deprive the vast majority of our members from worshiping for the sake of a few.
- And, of course, we need a pastor. I have an obligation to maintain my health for several reasons:
 - I need to be able to minister to you and every member of our congregation. While there has always been the possibility of my getting sick (and I have had a few issues over the years), I have an obligation to do everything reasonable to ensure that I will be here to serve you.
 - I share a residence with two other people whose lives will be significantly impacted if I contract the virus:
 - Kathy is a key employee at her job. Their lobby still remains closed to the public. All customer transactions take place through the drive-in window. Any employee, outside or inside worker, who shows symptoms needs to be tested and cleared before returning to work. It would be irresponsible of me to take ill-advised risks that would jeopardize her workplace.
 - Mom is at higher risk because of her age. With rare exceptions, she only leaves the house for medical visits, on-the-lawn worship and parking lot distribution, and occasionally to accompany me as I distribute our tablets to those who use them for worship because they have no internet.

So... When?

None of the above begins to answer the 2 questions I posed at the beginning, When? and, Under what circumstances?

The Elders and I discussed these questions at our meeting on Tuesday and came to the following plan. Please be aware that, as we have seen so many times in our planning, “The best laid plans ...”

We have established the following criteria for reopening:

- Daily new case count in Horry County is below 30 on every day for two, full consecutive weeks. This is not an average, nor is it a majority of the time. The numbers fluctuate so widely that there can be little confidence in any short-term pattern.
- We are not experiencing an increase in cases within our membership.
- We have enough trained staff who are willing, without be pressured, to return to the Sanctuary and perform the necessary tasks.
- The iWave air purification system has been installed in all three HVAC units. (This was accomplished last week.)

When these criteria are met, we will plan for indoor worship to resume with the following restrictions:

- Attendance will be limited to 25 in the building, including all staff persons. We will not be able to open the doors for extra ventilation, as we had proposed earlier. This results in a smaller number. Reservations will be made online or by calling the church office. We will add services as needed to accommodate numbers beyond 25, subject to available staff. The service time, currently 9:00, *may* be adjusted as we add services.
- Persons entering the building will move immediately to a seat. Seating will limited to the chairs that are already in place. They cannot be moved or regrouped. There will be no ‘fellowship’ conversations before worship.
- All in attendance will wear masks the entire time they are in the building. Pastor will wear a mask except for when leading the liturgy or preaching.
- Following service, those in attendance will exit from the back rows first to eliminate unnecessary crossing of paths and the inclination to strike up a conversation while in the building.
- Fellowship conversations can occur on the sidewalk, the front yard, or in the parking lot, so long as a clear path is maintained for others to pass.

This all sounds extremely rigid and unfriendly, even to me – right up until I remember those we love who have died, or have loved ones who have died, for no other reason than, as Hushang Babaie put it, “somebody didn’t wear a mask.”

I pray that this pandemic ends soon. I pray that all of us remain healthy until it does. I pray that we remember God’s rich blessings that we receive in the midst of this pandemic.

And I pray that we continue to love and serve each other, following Christ’s model.

In His service,

Pastor Panning