

Ascending Together

Rev. John Allen

One way to think about the book of Psalms is to see it as the hymnal of the Israelites. It is a compendium of songs shared by the people of Israel and Judah thousands of years ago. Carried forward to us as sacred words for our song and prayer.

And just like the music in our hymnals carry markers indicating that a song us meant for the beginning of worship or the end, or for Christmas season, or Springtime, many of the Psalms also carry labels that tell us their purpose.

Psalms 133, which we have heard read and sung this morning, is labeled as a “song of ascents.”

Which means it was a Psalm sung by pilgrims as they traveled toward Jerusalem and climbed the temple mount at the great festivals of the year.

So if you can imagine it, at Passover, or Pentecost, or Sukkot, the three pilgrim festivals, crowds of ordinary people pouring into the city from all sides, signing together.

Hinneh mah tov umah na'im
Shevet achim gam yachad

Behold how good and how pleasant
for kindred to dwell together in unity

Neighbors and strangers. From every direction. Friends, family, even rivals. People from all walks of life, pressed together as the road narrowed into the ancient city's streets.

Behold how good and pleasant
for kindred to dwell together in unity

Kind of makes me think we should have song we can all sing at the DMV, or on our way out of TD Garden, to better appreciate the good and pleasant nature of a crowd...

And I am sure that there was some pushing and shoving and jostling in those ancient crowds too, some impatience, and frustration. But how nice to have something to sing together, to remind each other that we are all going to the same place, we are all ascending together, how good, and how pleasant.

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I lived in New York City during Hurricane Sandy. My neighborhood of Morningside Heights was spared any serious damage. As its name would suggest, we avoided the flooding that inundated other parts of the island.

I remember in the days after that storm, coming out into darkened streets, streams of people making their way downtown, toward the serious damage, toward buildings without power for weeks, residents trapped on high floors with elevators inoperable.

The networks of activists and volunteers that had grown up around the Occupy Wall Street movement a year prior, sprung to life organizing mutual aid. Ordinary people from all over the

city made our way to pop-up organizing hubs to receive assignments. One day it might be walking through an apartment building, knocking on doors, finding out if folks needed prescriptions refilled, another day it might be digging mud out of homes on Staten Island/

One of the most amazing things about this time though was how, in a crisis, so many familiar logistical barriers just melted away.

I saw developers give permission over the phone for complete strangers to cut padlocks off half finished retail space to use a spot to store medical supplies. I saw NYPD officers and anarchist activists coordinating efforts in the lobby of an apartment building to canvas it more efficiently.

This moment of crisis brought people together. It sent distinctions between us crashing into the background, and our common humanity rushing to the fore.

That storm had rattled every one of our windows so violently we were sure they would shatter. And when we walked back out into the streets, we somehow remembered how much we shared in each other's destiny, we remembered that we are all going to the same place, we are all ascending together, how good, and how pleasant.

There are a cloud of clichés that name this phenomenon. About how crisis is an opportunity. About how challenging times bring us together.

And I suspect most of us could think of an example or two of how the crisis of COVID brought out the best in us, brought us more generously to the shared human table.

I certainly had an experience of ascending together as I stood on line with a crowd of strangers to receive my vaccine, looking gratefully into the eyes of the nurses poised to give us back our lives.

But this year has also pointed out a hard truth.

It is not inevitable that crisis will bring us together.

It is not inevitable that struggle provokes us to cooperation.

Great challenges *can* bring out the best in us. But it is not just a simple law of nature that they *will*.

Because as much as this year has been marked by healthcare heroes, drive-by birthdays, graduation parades, a newfound respect for essential work.

It has also been marked by irresponsible leadership, staggering vitriol in our public discourse, willful disregard for public health, and even insurrection.

Sadly, this crisis has not just revealed our capacity for turning out with generosity toward one another. It has also revealed how destructively fear can turn us inward, generating distrust, suspicion, and anger.

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So what makes the difference?

It makes me think back to that crowd of pilgrims in Jerusalem.

I wasn't there. But I feel confident enough based on my experience in similar crowds to say that "good" and "pleasant" were likely not the two words folks would have must readily used to describe their experience in that moment.

I doubt greatly that fresh mountain dew, and fragrant perfumed oils, were the most ready images in their minds. On the dusty road, crowded with those who had traveled many days...

But they had this song. Perhaps they remember hearing it as children, clinging to their parent's hand amidst a sea of legs. Perhaps it reminded them again, year, after year, after year, why it is that we come to this place on this day.

How good it is, and how pleasant
for kindred to dwell together in unity.

How good it is, and how pleasant
for kindred to dwell together in unity.

It is a song to remember that we are all going to the same place, we are all ascending together.

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That is what it takes to draw unity out of crisis. Maybe not a literal song, but some kind of drumbeat that synchronizes our steps, words and images from leaders that help us zoom out and see ourselves in the same storm together.

Sacred traditions that ground us in a story of humanity that is bigger than this moment, and that gives us hope in something more reliable than our limited human capacity.

Being a part of spiritual community can give us a song of ascent. A melody to keep us grounded in the bigger thing we are doing together.

And this tradition or Unity Sunday, bringing together two churches for worship that were generations ago torn apart by theological disagreement that descended into personal animus.

It can serve a song of ascent. A moment to find the notes of harmony between two traditions, distinct, but still both part of orienting us toward the Something More that in my tradition we call God.

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So as we, as a local community, and as a human family, look ahead to challenges that await us on the other side of this pandemic. A crisis of climate, a social fabric torn by misinformation, distrust and dissection that seems to impede even routine cooperation.

We would do well to not only listen for the story that can ground us in who we are together, but tell that story.

Not just listen for the song of our ascending together. But sing it.

