

“Gathered In”
Psalm 107:1-31
3rd Sunday in Lent

March 7, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
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The central act of God in our Psalm for today is found in one word:
Gathered.

“Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,” writes the Psalmist,
“those he redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.”

We have before us a Psalm of thanksgiving this morning.
A hymn of gratitude for God’s faithfulness.
How does the faithfulness of God manifest itself in this Psalm?
By gathering...God gathering God’s people together again.

There’s a lot packed into that one little word, isn’t there?

We’ve seen throughout the past year how much we take gathering
for granted, how we miss it when we’re not able to gather in our usual
ways.

Biblical scholars believe that today’s Psalm was written after the
exile, when the Israelites had returned from captivity in Babylon and
were back home in the Promised Land and were able to say:

God has redeemed us.
God has gathered us together again.

But the power of that word—gather—it’s not limited to the exiles of long ago. Nor is it something that only became obvious in the midst of the past year’s pandemic.

A little over 20 years ago, Robert Putnam published the book *Bowling Alone*, about connection and disconnection in the social fabric of American society.

In the opening chapter, Putnam tells the following story:

*Before October 29, 1997,
John Lambert and Andy Boschma knew each other
only through their local bowling league...*

*Lambert, a sixty-four-year-old retired employee of the University of Michigan hospital, had been on a...waiting list [for a kidney transplant] ...for three years
when Boschma, a thirty-three-year-old accountant,
[who only knew of Lambert through their bowling league]—
he learned... of Lambert’s need
and unexpectedly approached him
to offer to donate one of his own kidneys.*

Said Andy Boschma:

“I obviously feel a kinship [with Lambert]. I cared about him before, but now I’m really rooting for him.”

Lambert recalls: “When we were in the hospital Andy said to me, ‘John, I really like you and have a lot of respect for you. I wouldn’t hesitate to do this all over again.’”

Putnam concludes:

This moving story speaks for itself, but the photograph that accompanied this report in the Ann Arbor News reveals that in addition to their differences in profession and generation, [one man] is white and [the other] is African American.

*That they bowled together—
[knew one another because they gathered every week]—
made all the difference.¹*

One of our greatest fears is to be utterly alone.
With no one by our side, when we need someone by our side.

The pandemic has, perhaps, HEIGHTENED our awareness of this fear. But it is not a new fear. It's a fear that shows up when the stakes are high, when the decisions before us are truly a matter of life and of death.

As the Psalmist writes about the exiles in our Psalm for today:

“Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town...”

In other words, they were alone.

“Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery...they fell down, with no one to help.”

No one to help? They were alone.

¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

And the testimony of the Psalmist is that if we find ourselves in such a place, God will not abandon us.

There are four examples of distress given in this Psalm:

wandering in a desert wilderness—

imprisoned in darkness—

enduring sickness and affliction—

caught in a storm that causes courage to melt away—

and in each of those situations, the exiles call to God:

“Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,” writes the Psalmist, “and he redeemed them from their distress...”

In Psalm 107, a Psalm of thanksgiving and praise, the Psalmist is reminding us that God will go anywhere—absolutely ANYWHERE—to let us know that we are not alone.

The late Rabbi Hugo Gryn was a survivor of the Nazi regime, a teenager when he lived through the horrors in the concentration camps.

He recalls a day when all the prisoners were given a postcard and a pencil. They would be allowed, through the Red Cross, to send a note to anyone whom they chose.

At first, this news was a cause of excitement for the prisoners.

The teenage Hugo licked the pencil and got ready to write—only, he realized he could not think of anyone to write to. With the exception of his father, who was with him in the camp, he had no idea if other family members or friends were alive or dead.

After some time,

young Hugo handed back the card and the pencil,

and his feelings of abandonment were very real.

Knowing...that he was not alone.

“Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.”

That’s not simply a geographical statement.
It’s a THEOLOGICAL statement.

East, west, north, south—that’s the Psalmist’s way of saying that the faithfulness of God is unshakable, that there is no place the love of God WILL NOT go...

All of which, in my mind, raises an important question.
What about God’s church?
What about you and me?
What lengths will we go to, in order to let our neighbors know, both near and far, that they are not alone?

I’m remembering a time in our own church’s history.
I was not around for this part of Westminster’s history.
But it’s described with great clarity by Sue Inman in her marvelous history of our church.

“During the 1960s,” she writes, “the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing throughout the country. Under Dr. [John] Haley’s leadership, the Session passed a resolution to seat anyone of any race who came to worship at Westminster.”

That may not seem like much today, but at the time, that kind of statement was not without opposition. Word of what Westminster was doing made its way outside the church.

“The controversial stand John Haley and others had taken brought threats. One night, when John was returning by train from a meeting in Atlanta, [word got out] that a cross might be burning in [John Haley’s] front yard upon his return. [So] Westminster elders Tom Gower and Dave Norris (who were on opposite sides in politics) joined forces, went to the depot, and escorted [Dr. Haley] home.”³

In other words, they said to him: You are not alone!

Fast forward to today.

The particular issues are different, but the responsibility is the same.

It strikes me that one of our greatest responsibilities as the body of Christ is to gather people together.

- People who are on opposite sides of the political aisle—to gather them in one sanctuary.
- People who are of different economic backgrounds—to gather them on the same mission trip.
- People who have been on different faith journeys in their lives—to gather them in the same Sunday School classroom...

In doing so, God’s Church might show that we are committed to something deeper than partisan politics, something deeper than standards

³ Sue Inman, *Growing in Faith: A History of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina, 1947-2007*.

of living, something deeper than the neighborhoods we live in or the news we listen to...

We are committed to Christ.

We are committed to the one who says in the Gospel of John:

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Notice the language.

Not some people.

Not most people.

Not Christian people.

All people.

It is in the nature and character of God to gather ALL people.
Which means that God’s Church, in our gatherings, is called to welcome all people in here.

And to work for justice for ALL people out there.

I’ve got an image in mind that I can’t seem to get out of my head.
Let me share it with you, this image, this story...and let’s see where it takes us.

This year will mark the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

In his excellent book about that awful day, Mitchell Zukoff tells the story of a Fire Captain named Jay Jonas.

Jonas had led his crew of firefighters into the burning North Tower, because that was their job, a job they were proud to do. They started climbing Stairwell B, hoping to reach the floors where the plane had hit.

They made it up to the 27th floor.
But at that point, the South Tower collapsed.

They were in the North Tower, did not know how bad things really were—but Jay Jonas had a feeling when he heard the rumbling next door—and he ordered his men to turn around and start heading back down.

The feeling of anxiety in Jonas only grew—that he and his men needed to move as quickly as they could.

When they got to the 20th floor, they came upon a woman named Josephine Harris. Ms. Harris was struggling mightily—she had hobbled down from the 73rd floor, but because of numerous health ailments of her own, she was unable to go any farther.

“Hey Cap,” one of Jay’s crew said, “what do you want us to do with her?”

*Every fiber in Jay’s body wanted to speed up and get as far away as possible...*but he also knew that he and his men had not rescued anyone yet, and Ms. Harris needed help.

So he instructed his crew to take her with them—
helping her walk, carrying Ms. Harris if need be.

It meant an agonizingly slower descent.

They made it all the way down to the 4th floor when they heard the noise, the North Tower collapsing. Jonas thought he was going to die in that stairwell. But somehow, miraculously, Jay Jonas and the other firefighters with him—

along with Ms. Harris—
happened to be in a place in the North Tower—

the 4th floor of stairwell B—a place that would, against all odds, remain intact and survive the collapse.

In other words, their position in the stairwell, for unknown reasons, protected them. And once they got out, Captain Jonas realized that if he and those around him in Stairwell B had been a little higher or a little lower at the moment of the collapse, they would have died as well.

And something became very clear.
It wasn't just that they had rescued Josephine Harris.

Because they had stopped to help her, and because they went down at her pace, *her presence with them saved their lives as well.*

In the days that followed, Ms. Harris was interviewed about what happened, and she said of the crew at Ladder 6:

“They are [the most] strong, brave, caring, kind people I have ever met. When I was scared, they held my hand. They took off their jackets and gave them to me when I was cold. They told me not to be afraid, they would get me out. And they did.”

The feeling was mutual.

Josephine Harris was made an honorary member of Ladder 6, and was given a jacket which read “Guardian Angel.”⁴

Why did that story come to my mind today?
Because it's about the power—the extraordinary power—
that comes from knowing you are not alone.

⁴ Mitchell Zuckoff, *Fall and Rise: The Story of 9/11*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2019.

But I also wonder if we can use that story as a way of imagining the Church's embodiment of the faithfulness of God.

Sometimes, you and I are the ones who are stuck, right? Trapped by forces beyond our control. And then God sends someone to carry us. To help us get through whatever it is we're going through.

Has that ever happened to you?

Other times, you and I are doing our job, going forward with what we're supposed to do, when we get interrupted by someone else's need—and we rearrange our plans, and in helping our neighbor, we realize that it is our life that has been changed, perhaps our own lives that have been saved.

And yet, there's another way, a third way to think about this...

When the North Tower collapsed, it destroyed the firetruck that Jay and his crew had driven there and were trying to reach.

So Jay Jonas walked back to his firehouse that afternoon.

It was a long walk. And as he was walking, going through Chinatown, he noticed 20 Chinese-American men following him at a respectful distance.

One came up to him, falling in step beside him.

"You okay?" the man asked.

"Yeah," Jay said. He told them where his firehouse was, and he said: "I'm okay as long as I keep going. If I stop, I'm not going to want to start again."

“Okay,” the stranger said, “we’ll make sure you get there.”

And those 20 strangers walked behind Captain Jonas, like a solemn honor guard, to ensure that Jay Jonas returned safely to the firehouse he left that morning.⁵

Many times, we in God’s church are simply called to be the people walking behind someone, alongside someone—not rescuing, not saving, just making sure that someone gets to where they need to go.

Making sure they know that they are not alone.

And so the question becomes how we will do it.

Because before too long, the pandemic will be over, and we will be able to gather in our familiar ways.

I’m confident about that.

And I’m looking forward to that.

What I’m wondering is if there might be new ways for us to gather.

What I’m wondering is if there might be new people for us to welcome and reach out to...

I’m wondering how can our future gatherings might even more faithfully reflect the Kingdom of God—where people will come from east and west and north and south?

⁵ Ibid.

I'm wondering how we might continue the rich tradition already present in this congregation—a tradition of making sure that every child of God knows that they are cherished, knows that they are loved, and that they are not alone...

Amen.