



Where Do You Look?

First Mennonite – July 4, 2021

Psalm 123, Psalm 86

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to worship and share with you this morning.

The title of this morning's message is "Where do you look?"... The simple answer is every where... We look at our surroundings when we go for a walk. Many of us enjoy looking at God's creation of flowers, beautiful prairie sunrises and sunsets, and more. This morning you may have looked to see what you would have for breakfast, well those of us that have breakfast did.

Sometimes we look for groceries, fruit without blemishes. I am not much of a fan of bruised apples. You know those spots that are brown and mushy when you bite into or peel an apple. Or maybe it is a particular brand that you like and without that brand, well... it's just not the same. It just does not satisfy your needs the same way. For me that's what it's like with chocolate. My favourite is dark chocolate. Some of you may be thinking, how can he eat that stuff... Well,.. I do and it gets better or worse depending upon your taste in chocolate... I like Lindt 78% cacao chocolate. Anything else and my chocolate tastebuds are looking for more cacao and less sweet.

Each of us has favourite things to which we look forward. We look to them to help satisfy our wants and needs. The chocolate example is a rather simple example of things that one looks for to make life just that little bit better. Unfortunately not everything we look for is that simple or straightforward.

Imagine your birthday is coming up... What would you be looking for?... Maybe it's a cake and friends with which to share... If you are you going to make it then you would be looking for supplies... Is a partner or friend going to make it for you? In that case you would be looking to someone

else to meet your want for a birthday cake... If you are a young child or an older adult the need to look to others to fulfill the want or desire for a cake depends upon someone else. That may not be so bad, because they would have the clean-up after making the cake.

The problem as I see it,... is that as soon as we need someone else to do something for us that complicates the whole thing. We can become dependant upon others. Sometimes I look to my children for help, especially with technology such as my cell phone and iPad. They smile, sometimes tease and then help out, but only after trying to get me to learn how to solve the problem on my own. Now, I am not totally dependant upon them. I do solve some of the technology problems on my own, although sometimes with the help of a YouTube video. But all of that aside, they are willing to help. I look to them and they respond.

We look to many people and things for help in our daily activities, hoping that our lives will be a little better as a result. The opening of Psalm 123 has the human lifting their eyes and looking "to you whose throne is in heaven." But then for some unknown reason the psalm turns its focus away from heaven. It next speaks of a slave looking to their master and the eyes of a maid looking to her mistress for help. The slave and maid turn to earthly supports, those that they feel may have an immediate positive impact upon their lives. This may be our earthly response. It may also be a response of false hope.

I propose that we look at this through a metaphorical lens. We can be slaves to many things or people in a modern context. There are things and people that have a great deal of impact upon our lives. At times we unknowingly allow them to have much influence over us to the point that we are no longer in control. In Psalm 123 the slave is dependant upon the master for survival, the maid upon the mistress. Both are hoping that they will be treated well. They may feel that they have no choice but to rely upon master and mistress, looking up with their eyes, to them for help.

Unfortunately that reliance can be misplaced. There is a power differential in these situations. The master and mistress may have only their own best self-interest at heart. True caring for others may not exist as the mistress or master only care about the extent to which their own needs are being met. Thus faith in them is misplaced. Then... where can the slave and maid look?... In whom can they put their trust and faith?

The Psalmist gives us some direction in verse 1 writing, "I lift my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven." Then immediately the psalm turns to the plea of two individuals when they look to their master and mistress. They are looking upwards but they are looking to their immediate condition. At this point they have not realized that it is with the Lord that we can find support and mercy to their fullest extent. And it is not with those we perceive as having great influence upon us.

Verses 3 and 4 express that plea to the Lord for help. Whether it be in historical Judaea or in Saskatoon today there are those that are taken advantage of. Where are they looking for help?

Psalm 86 provides clarification about where to look. Verse 2 makes it clear that we are servants of the Lord. It does not say that we are servants of a master or mistress. Further it says that we should put our trust in the Lord to provide for us. It does not say we should solely put our trust in those around us. "Guard my life, for I am devoted to you. You are my God; save your servant who trusts in you." We are servants of the Lord.

As I was writing my mind turned to the children abused and those that died in the Indian Residential schools. These children could not look to their families for support. Those charged with responsibility of caring for and the well-being of the children used the power they had in ways that lead to tragedy. There was most certainly a power differential. A phrase comes to mind that I shared with students during my days as a teacher, "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The Residential Schools as we have come to learn were situations where the abuse of power and the perception of doing the right thing were abused.

The children were taken from their families and their faith traditions. Where could the children turn? Those that they thought would and should look after them did not. And now the looking intensifies. How is this to be reconciled? To whom can the Indigenous peoples look?

The slave and mistress turned to those with the most impact upon their lives. They were putting their faith in individuals that had much control over them. Did they put their faith in individuals they thought would care for them? Or was their faith in these individuals misplaced? Our Indigenous neighbours are looking, looking for answers, trying to understand why these horrors were perpetrated. They struggle with the society around them.

When you are struggling and vulnerable where do you look for support? Some of us look to family members, especially as we age. I know this to be true with my mother. She is dependant upon my brother and me for many things. It's not only us but the staff of the care home where she lives that she relies upon for support. Sometimes none us are able to meet her needs in her eyes. The question arises in my mind where else could she be looking for support. Her faith in us is not misplaced but solely looking to us does not seem to be meeting her needs. There is more and elsewhere where she should be looking. But I do not know if she has the faith to look.

This may not be the first time that you engage in a reflection upon faith. As an anabaptist we bring a unique lens to faith and its expression. Where we put our faith, I find, is an interesting question. This morning each of us put our faith in a number of different things and possibly in a number of different people. As I prepared to travel from Hague to First Mennonite, I had no choice but to put my faith in my vehicle. Without it starting and running correctly the journey to First Mennonite would not have been possible. Faith was placed in others that they would not impede my travels. It appears that my faith was not misplaced as here I stand before you. In what or whom did you place your faith this morning?

Psalm 123, a song of Ascents, was our first scripture reading. Why is it a song of ascents? Jerome Creach in his commentary on Psalm 123 explains it in this way, "Psalm 123 is the fourth psalm in the collection of psalms held together by the common designation "of Ascents" in their titles (Psalms 120-134).¹ These psalms were probably collected for use during pilgrimage to Jerusalem or to promote such pilgrimage. The term "ascents" comes from a Hebrew root meaning "to go up." This word appears in the last line of the Chronicler's history as part of the report that Cyrus of Persia, having conquered the Babylonians, would allow the exiled people of Judah to return to their homeland and to worship God in the soon-to-be-rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. The word to the exiles concerning anyone who would return to Jerusalem was, "Let him go up" (2 Chronicles 36:23). Thus, "ascents" in the title of Psalm 123 denotes ascent to Jerusalem and/or to the temple on Mount Zion."

Thus we have an explanation of "ascents" in the context of scripture and the lives of the Israelites. But what about in a modern context? How would the English teacher in me define 'ascents'? Simply put, ascents means the act of climbing or moving upwards. And as the Israelites returned to Jerusalem and the temple they did just that. Travelling to Jerusalem meant

travelling to a plateau upon which the city is located in the Judaeen Mountains. Mount Zion, to which they travelled as well, is located just outside the walls of the Old City. You can see that there was climbing and looking upward involved in their lives.

In our context there is not much physical climbing. We have a broad expanse upon which to gaze on the prairies but it is quite different from the view the Israelites will have experienced from the top of a plateau in the mountains of Judaea.

We may not have mountains and a temple upon which to look and lift our eyes. The people of Judaea looked upwards to these places in times of struggle. Maybe they also realized that this looking upward was more than to human made places. These places were special in their lives, lives in which they faced many struggles. The maid and slave looked to those with greatest immediate impact upon them hoping for help to endure the struggles they faced. The psalmist reminds us to look to the Lord when he says, "...so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he shows us his mercy." This is the one master that can bring us through our struggles, and the one master whom have no need to fear.

Over the years I have been blessed with the opportunity to visit a number of churches and cathedrals in Europe. The structures are grand in scale and the artistry is awe inspiring. Consider where we might look as we enter. Ahead of us there may be an alter in the distance. To the sides there may be smaller more intimate locations for worship and prayer... And in some walls high above us are stained glass windows... Windows that have stood the test of time. But look up. Look up to the grandeur of the ceiling. There we find the graceful supporting arches. Between them we find breathtaking artworks.

For what reason was this awe inspiring artwork placed on the ceiling? Why do stained glass windows rise high above us?

Each of these marvels of human ingenuity and human creation cause us to look, each and everyone of us to look up. Yes, look up and gaze. Gaze heavenward beyond the supportive arches and awe inspiring artwork for they are human creations that can be easily destroyed. Destroyed as we saw on April 15, 2019. On that day fire broke out in Norte Dame Cathedral in Paris. Humans stood and watched. And they looked up. They looked up in fear that something so important to them was being destroyed.

Others looked up in fear, but also in prayer and song. They looked up to heaven to the one to whom we should be truly looking for support. Look up. Amen.