

Psalm 100

Upheld by the Presence

March 11, 2012, Joint Worship Service

When I was growing up, there was a very popular song on the radio. Written by Carole King and sung by James Taylor, it was a song of caring and promise and hope.

“If the sky above you should turn dark and full of clouds,  
and that old north wind should begin to blow  
Keep your head together and call my name out loud  
and soon I will be knocking upon your door.

You just call out my name and you know wherever I am,  
I'll come running to see you again.

Winter, spring, summer or fall  
all you got to do is call,  
and I'll be there by your side!

You've got a friend!”

---

We all have times when we feel alone, like no one cares. Times when life seems dark and there is no hope at all! Not too long ago, I had a phone conversation with a woman who was in that kind of dark place. She felt like she made a big mistake and there was no way to fix the problem.

Worse than that, she was alone. Her friends were far away. Her family was far away. She felt alone in an impossible situation. And the best I could do was to speak with her on the phone, this woman I barely know, and I listened to her story. I didn't try to fix the problem. I didn't give her advice. I listened.

I asked some questions. I pointed out where I felt the situation was not caused by her mistakes, but rather by the actions of others. I reassured her that she is not a bad person, that she did the best she could with the information she had at the time. Most of all, I reassured her that God loves her very much, that she is really not alone. God loves her, and God is with her, whatever she goes through. And then I prayed with her over the phone, to ask for her to have God's wisdom and the peace of Christ, that she would feel God's love wrapped around her. It was the best I could do over the phone.

But I wished I could have been with her in person, to hold her hand, to give her a hug, so that I could see her face and she could see mine. I wanted to uphold her by my physical presence, so that she wouldn't be alone, just talking to someone on the phone.

I wished that she could be upheld by my presence. I wanted it to be true that "soon I'll be knocking upon your door!" and then she would know that she has a friend.

---

There may be times that we come to church feeling down and lonely and like we need a friend. Jesus told us that we are no longer servants, but friends, and because Jesus is our friend, we can come to him when we have problems.

He knows what suffering is. He knows what it's like to be alone and facing the worst thing that could happen! He knows what it's like to feel forsaken! And he also knows what it's like to be in the presence of God, upheld by the Presence of God!

---

Wherever we are, we are in the presence of God, because God is everywhere! When we come to church, we come to spend time being aware of being in God's presence, worshipping God, expressing our gratitude for all that God has done for us, all that God is doing in our lives, and all that God will do in us and through us in the future. We come to church to be upheld by the presence of God, so that our spirits are renewed and strengthened!

And then we are equipped to go back out into the world to follow God's call to love and serve others in the name of Christ! We come in to be upheld by the presence of God, and we go out, carrying the presence of God out into the world with us!

Remember, Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is within you!" And so wherever we go, we take God's presence with us.

---

But sometimes we come to church and when we leave, not much has changed inside of us. We can be distracted by many things on Sundays. We can be worried about our jobs or paying our bills or the test we have coming up at school. We might be focused on the illness or the death of a loved one, or trouble in our marriage, or the trouble our kids are in.

We might just be so overwhelmed with all we have to do at home or work or school or all three that we are making our to-do lists in our heads instead of opening our hearts and minds to God. We might be ill or anxious and those concerns are keeping our focus on ourselves and not on God.

Our families might be far away and our thoughts are with them. So many things can keep us from being focused and present to God when we are in church together.

-----

Whatever is on our minds, there are times when we are not completely present with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength when we are here in worship. Our thoughts and our cares are somewhere else. Even though God is present in this very room, we might not know it because we are distracted.

We're not paying attention. We're thinking about too many other things! God is present to uphold us, but we are not present to uphold each other! Here in the United Methodist Church, when we take membership vows, we say that we will uphold the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service! Today we are talking about the second part of that vow---"upholding the church by our presence."

God upholds us by his presence in our lives, and God is always with us, but why do we vow to uphold the church by our presence? It's very nice to come to church and see our friends and people we love here. It's great to sing the hymns and sound full and strong together!

But that's not what we mean by our vow to uphold the church by our presence! Upholding the church by our physical presence is only one meaning of our vows. The other meaning is deeper. It's beyond our physical presence.

We need to be present spiritually. We need to bring everything that we are to church so that we can worship in spirit and in truth, and so we can love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. All of us who have joined this church have taken the vow to uphold it by our presence. So how can we keep this vow?

-----

How can we keep our vow to uphold the church by our presence? We can only do this as a community, as the Body of Christ together! Individually we will each have times when we cannot keep our eyes on Jesus, our spirits centered on God. But as a group, as a church family, we can do this! We do it every week! A certain number of us are distracted at any given time, but others among us are holding on to the presence of God, and their focus, their worship is on behalf of all of us!

Sometimes it will be you that has other concerns that interfere with worship. Other times you will be praising God with all that you are and someone else will be worried or anxious or just too tired. We worship as a body, not as individuals!

Sometimes each one of us needs to be encouraged. Other times the same people are able to encourage someone else! That is why we need each other all the time!

---

If you don't show up at church on Sunday, one of two things will happen. Either you will miss out on the encouragement you need for the coming week, or you will not be here to encourage someone else who needs it. When all of us are not here, our worship is diminished.

It lacks whatever it is you would bring to it that day. All of us have our spiritual gifts and they are all necessary! Otherwise God would not have called us to be the church together in this place!

We vow to uphold the church by our presence not just to make our attendance reports look good. We make that vow because we are the church TOGETHER! It takes **all** of us to be the church!

---

The woman I talked to on the phone a couple of weeks ago----she needed my encouragement and my prayers during that difficult time. At least I was able to be present to her on the phone, even though I couldn't be physically with her. She's doing better now, thanks be to God! And even though I don't know her very well, I know enough about her to know that she, when she is feeling stronger, is an encouragement to others.

And other people encourage me when I am weak. And this is how it should be---  
each one of us encouraging others at times and **needing** encouragement at others.  
This is why God gave us each other. Let us all remember that we all need a friend, and  
be there for each other! “You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, I’ll  
come running to see you again!” Right here at church! By your side! Let us all keep our  
promise to uphold each other by our presence! Amen!

---