Psalm 124
“Help!”
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…OUR HELP IS IN… …THE NAME OF THE LORD…

Everywhere we turn we see a world that needs help. It can be the easiest thing to live with the sense that everything around us is falling to pieces. Our families. Our nation. The hurricane ravaged coast. The Indians are doing great and even the Browns look all right but is there a little voice inside that says things are about to go wrong? There must be some pessimists among us today. If there are, you in touch with how the world needs a lot of help. Since we live in it, we need help too. Which brings us to Psalm 124.

Psalm 124 begins with “if.” “If” might seem strange way to begin prayer. But since prayer happens every time our hearts turn toward God, maybe isn’t so strange. Our minds and hearts turn all the time around questions beginning with “if.”

What’s one of your “if” questions? What if I’d taken that job instead of this one? What if I’d seen the warning signs earlier? What if we’d invested differently? What if, 20 years back, Christ Church had gone ahead built the addition being considered?

Some “if” questions are fun. Ten years ago our family almost moved to Kentucky. Last week at dinner we asked the boys, what if you guys had Kentucky accents? My second grade teacher always said, “‘What if’ questions aren’t to be answered.” Because answering, “What if the moon were made of cheese? Would it have melted during the solar eclipse?” doesn’t really further the science lesson. But that doesn’t stop us from prying into the “ifs” of how life has unfolded.

Have you ever seen a terrible accident and wondered, if I’d left home a minute later, would that have been me? On 9/11 Heather and I lived in New Jersey. It seemed like everyone knew someone that happened to be out of the office at the Trade Center that day, or was running late and so wasn’t in when the Towers when they fell. Just as everyone knew someone that was asking “what if” in a more terribly agonizing way.

“If the Lord had not been on our side when people attacked us, they would have swallowed us alive.” Like Israel, we live wondering how things could have been different. Different for the better, but also different for the worse. Like Israel, we are mindful of our vulnerability, if not always in the front of our thoughts, at least down in the pit of our gut.

Israel was a small nation in the midst of bigger, threatening neighbors. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, the Philistines with their champion Goliath. In Jesus’ day it was Rome. Their place in the world typically felt more precarious than secure. And when they felt secure by their own power or alliances with more powerful nations, history would prove that that security wasn’t security at all.

Which is where all of life’s “if” questions come from. Even if we don’t always acknowledge it, the deep recesses of our being know that the world, and life in general, can shift and change in ways we couldn’t have predicted and can’t control. You only need a patch of black ice to teach you that. So we end up wondering why things happened the way they did? We ask this in the blessings to less than the struggles.

Psalm 124 is a prayer is a prayer from conviction that Israel only made it through the Lord was on their side. What did they make it through? We don’t know exactly. But we do know there are other parts of Scripture, when their prayer wrestles with how God didn’t seem to be there in the way they’d hoped. As though God was actually against them. But turning the heart to a God that seems absent is prayer just the same.

Surveys tell us that most everyone is a praying person. Even among those that aren’t sure what they believe about God, most say that, at some point, they pray. Which means most everyone ends up asking, “If God is good and faithful, why do my fortunes seem to be turning against me?” This question leads us to the heart of the psalm.
The middle of the psalm acknowledgment that living is plain hazardous. To be alive is always to be in need of some kind of help. We may not always be mindful of it, but our lives are always on the line. People on the coast of Texas can tell us about vulnerability today in ways they wouldn’t have last month.

Verse 3 of the psalm imagines Israel swallowed alive. Verse 4 pictures them engulfed by a flood. So the situation in which God helped was pretty dire. The first image, that they could have been swallowed alive, is that of a dragon or a sea monster. Standing before the dragon you know you just don’t have a chance. It doesn’t matter that no one has ever seen a dragon. We all know they exist. They are the doom and gloom scenarios we live with as though they were really there. Sometimes they really are there. But a lot of the time, your dragon is the imagined loss you’re sure that you could never recover from.

The second image, the flood, depicts sudden disaster. In parts of the Middle East waterways have eroded the countryside. Sudden storms can send flash floods coursing through these gullies. For anyone inside there’s simply no escape. It’s when one moment your life is sunny and you’re making plans for the future. The next, all is disturbed by some catastrophe. For some, is listening to the news these days is like standing in a gully that could fill with a torrent at any moment?

These are sobering images but they don’t make Psalm 124 a downer prayer. It’s just a prayer that comes from two important truths. The first truth is negative. We’ve already mentioned it: our lives are more vulnerable than we care to acknowledge, and we need help beyond our own resources. But the second truth is positive, and more overwhelming than the first. “Our help is in the Lord who made heaven and earth.” And the Lord who is our help is for us. As we face our trouble, God is on our side for getting through it.

Author and fellow Presbyterian Anne Lamott has written a book called “Help, Thanks, Wow,” which she calls “the three essential survival prayers.” Across her life, Lamott has hit rock bottom in a struggle with alcohol and drug addiction. She’s been at the end of her rope as a single mother raising a teenage son. She’s watched her father die of brain cancer. She’s been in the doldrums over the state of the nation’s politics. And in her books she’s written about how God is right there with us in the struggle of life.

Here’s some of what she has to say on the prayer for help: “I’ve heard people say that God is the gift of desperation.” If you are feeling desperate in some way right now, it’s worth considering that your desperation is the wrapping in which God is coming as a gift. Lamott continues, “There’s a lot to be said for having really reached a bottom where you’ve run out of any more good ideas, or plans for everybody else’s behavior; or how to save and fix and rescue; or just get out of a huge mess, possibly of your own creation.

“You may take a long, quavering breath and say, ‘Help.’ People say ‘help,’” says Lamott, “without actually believing anything hears that. But it is the great prayer, and it is the hardest prayer, because you have to admit defeat — you have to surrender, which is the hardest thing any of us do, ever.”

I’d guess that right now most of us face some situation in which we ask, what is the purpose of this thing I’m going through? Or how is what I’m facing going to go anywhere good? It’s in your family. It’s in your job. It’s in your health. It’s in a closet in your heart that no one knows about except you.

Well, no one except you and God. God knows about the dragons that are invisible to everyone else. And Psalm 124 invites us to consider, and to trust, that God’s right there with us in the struggle. In Psalm 124, God isn’t the one that sent the dragon to Israel. God didn’t unleash the flood that threatened to wash them away. God was there making a way through, so that the prayer becomes, “Praise be to the Lord who has not let us be torn by their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the fowler’s snare; the snare has been broken and we have escaped.”

But the escape, the victory, came by way of surrender. Not to the threatening dragon or overwhelming flood but to God and that help that only God could give.

According to the Psalms, the greatest fear isn’t any situation we face. The greatest of fears is the loss of divine protection. That God would not be there to save us. This is where those who pray, “Our help is in the name of the Lord” look to the God that Jesus shows. In him see the character of a God who will stand by us in everything. As Jesus said to
Peter in the passage from the Gospel, even the gates of Hades, the place of death, will not be able lock out God’s saving help.

This means that the big “if” in life isn’t whether God will be there as our helper. It’s whether we will trust that God is, even when it may seem that he isn’t.

Anne Lamott suggests that prayer involves accepting what she calls “the three terrible truths of our existence: that we are so ruined, and so loved, and in charge of so little.” These truths are why, when Reformer John Calvin rewrote the worship service in cities where he pastored, Strassburg and Geneva, where he pastored, it because in Psalm 124, verse 8: “Our help is in the name of the Lord the Maker of heaven and earth.” He said worship had to open this way because it named the truth of our live us as well as any one sentence could.

We’re all looking for some sort of truth to live by. Something that will be there for us in ever-shifting days. It just isn’t enough to say simply, “God is the truth.” You have to make the move to say, “The truth is, God is there to help.” To say that means to you are ready to move from a life of fear and uncertainty to one that’s ready to pray, “Thank you. Thank you.” And “Wow. Wow. Wow.”

Or as the version Bible called The Message puts Psalm 124, verse 6: “Oh, blessed be God! He didn’t go off and leave us.” Which means the great “what if” of life has do to with what is possible, for you, for me, for Christ Church, right in this world, when we surrender to God’s help. When we look in the face of our dragons with the confidence that our Lord and Maker there at our side. Amen.