



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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July 12, 2009

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 131

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First Lesson: 2 Samuel 12:11-25

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 30

Second Lesson: 2 Timothy 1:8-14

Gospel: Mark 5:21-24a, 35-43

### **May the Lord Give us Humble Confidence**

I bring you greetings from the LECC – the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church in Japan – four hundred brothers and sisters who know and believe what you know and believe. I bring you their greetings in the name of the Father who has given us our bodies and souls and all things. I bring you their greetings in the name of God the Son who loved us and freed us from our sins by his own blood. And I bring you their greetings in the name of God the Holy Spirit, sent to us by the Father and the Son to save us and guide and bless us and keep us in the one true faith.

I would like to begin by telling you a short story, a true story about something that happened just a couple weeks ago. My family and I flew into America, flying first of all into the West Coast, to the Seattle area. And the story I am about to tell you is a story of beauty, sudden danger, deliverance and thanksgiving.

We went to Vancouver Island and climbed a short mountain called Mount Douglas. From the top of that mountain we saw beautiful things. We saw the Olympic Mountains in Washington. We could see the San Juan Islands. We could see the beautiful port city of Victoria. But then as we were coming down the mountain, we were almost near the bottom and our children decided they would climb one straight, steep path straight up one more time because they had more energy than the adults. The plan was for them to travel a little bit around the mountain and come back down and join us again near the bottom. But the next thing we know, our oldest son is coming down that long, straight path, picking up speed, going faster and faster, unable to stop.

Sudden danger – there was nothing he could do once he was in that situation to save himself, and there was nothing that we, his parents, could do to help him or to save him. We could not push the pause button and walk up the mountain and meet him half way and help him down the rest of the way, nor could we push the rewind button and go back in time and tell him before he started down that mountain, “you have to be very careful.” He continued down that mountain at a great rate of speed and at the bottom flipped over, slid over the top of a rock, flipped over again and landed on his back, right in front of us. When we were looking at him, we didn’t notice that there were trees on both sides and many rocks at the bottom. He could have been killed. He could have been paralyzed. But all he had was a broken arm. And we have been giving thanks to the Lord ever since. The Lord sent his angels to guard and protect him so that he did not hit his head against a stone.

That event is a picture of every human being. We are born into this world with the opportunity to enjoy beauty, the beauty of God's creation, but we are in danger. We are all separated from our God by our sins, and there is nothing we can do to save ourselves or each other.

But God has saved us, not by sending angels for us but by sending his own Son to live for us and die for us and rise again. That is the message we give thanks for every day of our lives. And that is the message that we are sending out into the world through our world missions.

They told us in the emergency room that little boys never break their arms climbing the mountain. They always break their arms coming down the mountain. Descending is much more dangerous than ascending.

The part of God's Word that we study today is a song of ascents. If you opened your Bibles and saw the beginning of this Psalm, you noticed those words in the title, a song of ascents; a song of going up. Psalms 121 through 134 are all called songs of ascent because the Old Testament Israelites sang and recited these Psalms as they went up to Jerusalem for their annual festivals. Psalm 131 is not a very well known Psalm and not very well known among the songs of ascent, but it is a wonderful Psalm, and a Psalm that we want to make our own and take to heart. We do so today with the theme, "May the Lord Give us Humble Confidence."

King David prayed for humble confidence. The members of the LECC in Japan need to pray for humble confidence. And we, Lutheran Christians living in America, the members of the WELS, also need to pray for humble confidence – a simple three-part sermon, King David, the LECC, and the WELS.

King David was in a difficult circumstance. He had been anointed to be king over Israel. But the first king of Israel, Saul, was still alive. What do you think King Saul thought about King David? "He is an aspiring man, a man who wants something that is not rightfully his. He is a rebel, a traitor, somebody who needs to be killed." And no doubt the people of Israel were also torn. Who should be their king, King Saul or King David? Even in David's family, David's parents and his brothers seem to have had some ill feelings towards David and some jealousy. He was the youngest son. Why should he be chosen to be king over Israel?

But David could say in this Psalm:

<sup>1</sup> My heart is not proud, O LORD,  
my eyes are not haughty;  
I do not concern myself with great matters  
or things too wonderful for me.

King David had not chosen to be king over Israel. God had chosen him. David was not looking down on other people or trying to get ahead of other people. He simply was

doing what the Lord wanted him to do. To make that point, David compares himself to a weaned child.

<sup>2</sup> But I have stilled and quieted my soul;  
like a weaned child with its mother,  
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

In Old Testament times, children were weaned from their mother's milk at the age of three or four or maybe even five. David compares himself to a child. He says, "I am just a child in the presence of God. He knows everything. I know nothing."

We can say the same thing. There is a huge difference in knowledge and understanding between a parent and a three- or four-year-old child. God knows so much more than we do about life and about sharing his name in this world. We are like children. We need his help and his guidance.

I think King David has another thought in mind when he compares himself to a weaned child. A child from the time it is born wants its mother's milk, craves its mother's milk, goes after and gets its mother's milk. And when it is time for that child to be weaned from that milk, the child doesn't always want to give it up and doesn't want to make the transition to table food. We are all born into this world with a natural desire, a craving for vain glory, earthly glory, pleasure and power and wealth. And only God can wean us from that sinful, natural desire for the things of this world.

David could say that he was like a child weaned from his mother's milk. He was not after vain glory. He did not have his heart set on being a grand and glorious king. He wanted what the Lord wanted.

Some people would say that King David could write and sing this Psalm because he had a heart like the Lord's own heart. Some people would say that we cannot sing this Psalm because we are more filled with pride than King David was. But it is good for us to read and to study and to sing this Psalm. For when we do, we teach ourselves and admonish ourselves and the Lord leads us to put our hope more in him than in earthly things. So the words of this Psalm apply, not only to King David, they also apply to the LECC in Japan and to the WELS in America.

Your 400 brothers and sisters living in Japan are Christians just like you. But they are living in a very different environment. There are two things I want you to remember about being a Christian in Japan – the number "one" and the word "conformity." Only one percent (1%) of the Japanese population is thought to be Christian. Ninety-nine percent (99%) do not know who Jesus is – ninety-nine percent (99%).

Japan is a society of conformity. That may be hard for us to really visualize because in America, we have much variety. People from all different backgrounds and countries, speaking all different languages, with many different customs; but in Japan, everyone is Japanese, speaking Japanese, following Japanese customs, many of which are Buddhist. It is very difficult for your brothers and sisters in Japan to confess their faith

before others, for when they do, they stand out and the society does not readily welcome them or accept them. It is not in any way against the law to do mission work in Japan or to worship as a Christian. Your brothers and sisters in Japan do not need to worship secretly or to hide what they are doing. But the society does not welcome them into their society. Rather, the society puts pressure on them to return to their Buddhist Japanese ways.

So many Japanese Christians study the Bible for five or ten years before they have the courage to confess their faith and be baptized into Christ. And for that reason, it is also difficult for them to share their faith with the 99% around them who are not Christian. They want to share their faith, but they can't be pushy about it and drive all of their family members and friends away. So they pray, and they wait, and they look for every opportunity to share the hope that we have.

One great opportunity to do mission work in Japan is Christmas. Perhaps in America we don't think of Christmas as being evangelism season, but in Japan, it is. That is the best opportunity to invite unbelievers to come into a Christian church to hear the true meaning of Christmas. Japanese department stores are filled with Christmas trees and presents and you can even hear Christmas carols in the department stores, in English. But they don't know the true meaning of Christmas. So in the weeks leading up to Christmas and the days surrounding Christmas, our churches in Japan are filled with outreach activities.

In Japan, almost nobody knows anything about Easter. They do not know that it even is the celebration of Jesus rising from the dead. In Japan, Easter is a time when many believers were baptized – baptized on Easter, united with Christ in his death, given the forgiveness of sins, and united with him in his resurrection, alive in him forever, alive unto God, in this world and forever.

Another great opportunity for people in Japan to share their faith with others is at their own funeral. At their funeral, all of their co-workers and friends and family members, 99% of which are not Christian, come into God's house to experience a Christian funeral.

As you might guess, a Christian funeral is very different from a Buddhist funeral. A Buddhist funeral has the person who died at the very center. The worship that goes on in a Buddhist funeral is to give praise and honor and glory to the one who has died. Incense is offered to the one who has died. Flowers are offered to the one who has died. Chanting to the one who has died, for according to Buddhism, when a person dies, they become gods. So even after a person has died, Japanese people will go to the graves of their loved ones, to offer prayers and offerings to them to gain their favor so that they can receive blessings from their ancestors who have died.

All people who die in Japan are cremated. So after the funeral, the body is taken to a crematorium. It's a grand building with stone and marble floors and walls. When you walk in the front entrance, it looks like a grand hotel with four elevator doors. But they

are not elevator doors. They are ovens. In front of each oven is a makeshift altar for a Buddhist priest to offer incense and prayers to the one who has died. It's a terrible smell – the smell of death, the smell of incense that is being offered to gods that do not exist.

This year, a family in our church, the Matsuda family, experienced the loss of a loved one. Their 30-year-old daughter who had never smoked found out that she had Stage 4 lung cancer. Talk about sudden danger. There was nothing she could do to help herself and nothing her parents could do to help her. But because her parents were Christian, during this time of difficulty she turned to God's Word. She was baptized three weeks afterwards. Exactly one month from the time she was baptized, we had in the same church her Christian funeral.

At that funeral, many people, 100 people came, stuffed into a church building which comfortably holds 60 or 70 people – 100 people, many of them hearing the Gospel for the very first time. Many of them said at that funeral, "We never heard before what Christianity was all about." But in the weeks and months that followed that Christian funeral, some of the Matsuda's friends and family members and neighbors said to them, "That was not a very good funeral."

How would you feel if after the funeral of one of your loved ones you heard from other people, "Not a very good funeral"? Why did they say that? Because the vain glory of this world was not present at that funeral. The milk of vain glory was not there. Glory was not given to Sheho San, who had died. Prayers were not offered to her. Incense was not offered to her. Instead, glory was given to the Lord who had saved her. The people of this world want earthly, vain glory given to people instead of glory given to God.

So we need to pray for the Matsuda family. We need to pray for all of our brothers and sisters in Japan that they not give in to that pressure of the society which wants to drive them away from Christ towards earthly, vain glory. They need to pray, as King David prayed, "Lord, give us humble confidence; confidence to know that if we have Christ, we have everything; confidence to know that if we don't have Jesus, we have nothing."

The people of the LECC need your prayers, especially in the next year or two, because they are going to lose the support of missionaries sent from the WELS. Because of the current financial circumstances, the last remaining missionary in Japan will have to return within a year or two. Can they stand on their own without missionary support? Will they remain true to God's Word, or will the society in which they live overcome them and swallow them up and drive them away from their Savior? They need to pray, and we need to pray for them, "Lord, give them humble confidence."

We in the WELS here in America also need humble confidence, don't we? Later this month at our Synod convention, we will be making very difficult decisions about how to cut ministry, worker training, home and world missions, or both. Looking only at statistics, our church is a church in decline. Do we have reason to be afraid? Should

we give up? Is all lost? We also need to pray as King David prayed, “Lord, give us humble confidence.”

We should be humble because all of the blessings that we have in our church are not something we have created. God has given those blessings to us. It is good for us to remember and to count those blessings.

Did you know that in Japan, and probably in America too, 80% of Christian churches do not teach Creation? Eighty percent (80%) teach evolution, that the world got here on its own. The stars in the sky declare the glory of God, but 80% of Christian churches in this world do not declare the glory of the Almighty God. We are blessed in our church body to have childlike faith that trusts that God is God.

And in our church, we are blessed to know what the work of the church is. We have in our hands, given to us by our risen Savior, the keys to heaven. It is our purpose in this world to use those keys to lock and unlock the doors of heaven by proclaiming God’s message of sin and grace, the Law and the Gospel. Our message is not a message about this world. It is not a social gospel. It is about the kingdom of Christ whose kingdom is not of this world and whose kingdom is eternal. We are blessed to have this Gospel message handed down to us from our Lutheran forefathers, all a gift of God’s grace. And we need to humbly rejoice in that blessing.

What a privilege it is to be a part of a church body that places God’s Word above human reason rather than the other way around, using human reason to explain and manipulate God’s Word. Lord, continue to give us humble confidence. Give us humble joy, for you have truly blessed us.

But we also need confidence. Not only humility, but also confidence to stand on God’s Word even when the world may laugh at us and scoff at us. Jesus experienced the same scoffing. We heard about it in our Gospel today when Jesus says, “She is not dead but asleep.” They laughed at him.

In the same way, when we go out into the world and tell the people around the world, including the people of Japan, “Those who are in Christ will rise again on the Last Day,” especially in Japan, they may laugh at us and think to themselves, “Impossible.” May the Lord give us humble confidence.

Many of the children who are here today know very well the story of David and Goliath. After David was anointed king, but before he became king over Israel, he went out to the battlefield. The Israelites were fighting against the Philistines. We know many details of that story. How David tried on Saul’s armor, but it didn’t fit. How he grabbed five smooth stones and killed the giant with God’s help, with one smooth stone. But there is one part of that story that we often forget.

When David got out to the battlefield, his oldest brother, Eliab, said to David, “Why did you come out here? Why aren’t you back with your few sheep, back in the pasture?”

This is no place for a little guy like you. You, David, are wicked! You are conceited! You are looking for glory for yourself.” David knew in his own heart that he was not after earthly glory. He was simply putting his hope and his trust in the Lord.

In this world as we, the members of the WELS, take a strong stand on God’s Word, there may be times when people say to us, “You are wicked. You are conceited.” May the Lord give us humble confidence.