

**Life: The Spiritual Gas Station**  
**Psalm 122**  
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Ten months ago our nation was struck by a horrible tragedy that earned the name of Hurricane Katrina. Our region is no stranger to hurricanes and certainly no stranger to hurricanes that bear enormously forceful winds. But, in those storms that have hit our state, they usually wreak havoc on one region and though we offer our services for a period of time ultimately most of us can go on about our lives without much inconvenience. Katrina was a different story.

As with all tragedy, blessings and banes are a part of the equation. For St. John's our blessing came in the form of the Thompson family, New Orleans evacuees, who embraced us even as we have sought to embrace them. But, the bane of the experience was demonstrated throughout our community in the form of fuel. Remember? We didn't have any. Or at least not much.

I cannot forget the day that I was feeling frantic about looking for gas in the early morning hours and fortunately made the right choice on my first try. Even then I had to pay the premium price but I didn't mind because I got just what I needed. Even with my slight anxiety, I had a confidence about locating the fuel and was amazed that when I pulled up to the tank, I was the only one there. Literally, within seconds, there was line of cars down the road. I was astounded! The woman beside me at the pump was so frustrated and angry that she had driven to three places and just **now** found the gas she wanted. I was struck by her anger. Why could she not just be joyful that she had found what she needed? Why did it have to happen just the way she wanted—on her first try? Then, I realized that her attitude probably would have been my own if I was standing within her shoes. I was forced to learn a hard lesson—we all are a selfish people.

Since that day, the fuel situation has never really returned to normalcy. And yet, people do not stop visiting the gas stations. They do not stop purchasing at whatever price required, the amount of fuel they need. They might buy hybrid vehicles and change their methods of filling up. But, they never stop seeking and attaining what they truly need.

Our psalm is about a group people who would not stop seeking what they needed. Our psalm is what is known as one among many of the "Songs of Ascents." These were songs that pilgrims who were traveling to Jerusalem would use to pass the time, to remind them about what they were doing and why they were doing it. This particular psalm confesses that this pilgrim (who, no doubt, sings on behalf of others) is being invited onto the holy territory of relationship with God. 'I rejoiced when they said unto me, "Let us go into the house of the Lord.'" Though the song is sung by one, or so the words lead us to believe, the psalmist is not alone in entering this holy territory. They have just arrived in that territory of Jerusalem. It was the center of faith, the location of the temple and a symbolic place of God's presence. Jerusalem was also the center of justice where conflicts that had not been settled in the local courts would be taken for resolution. Think about our judicial system. When we watch television, we see alleged criminals being transported by security guards with onlookers and boycotters. It was the same sort of situation in Jerusalem. So the people must pray for its peace. Jerusalem stood as a stronghold both physically and figuratively. Because of what Jerusalem

represented in their lives—physical security and spiritual safety in the awareness of God among them--the people prayed for its peace.

It is easy to read this psalm at face value, but I think that I am right in saying that we are not a face value kind of people. I hope that we come to this place because we really want to know God, because we really want deep relationship with God, because we want to know how to live. If so, we have to dig more deeply. In so doing we realize that this scripture is less about physical movement from one place out in what was a barbaric culture to the safety and peace of Jerusalem's walls. It is about a spiritual journey that most of us are not willing to take. It is about refueling our spiritual systems.

George Barna is a futurist and while I must confess that I have not read his latest work, I am told that Barna has changed his tune from earlier predictions about the shape of the church's future. This is hearsay, you understand, but apparently ole George now believes that the moderate church is in decline. To that I say, duh! I could have told him that ten years ago! Here's why. Observe our world. We live a world where people search so frantically for something—much like they searched for gas amid the Hurricane Katrina crisis. In their searching, life becomes about what they want to achieve, about their agenda, about them. That sort of searching always leads to situations that are less than desirable. Why? Because the self is in the way. There is not peace in our world because too many people can't see past themselves to see God within others. The church is not growing because people can't see past themselves to see God. Deacons meetings in every church are frustrating at best because people seek their agenda and don't stop to really pray for God's purposes in their paths. Individuals miss God trying to work in the painful places of their lives because they cannot see past themselves to see that God has a higher and better way.

Observe our churches. Some are of the liberal persuasion—they are issue centered and service oriented but they do not speak the name of Jesus Christ because they haven't spent sufficient time as individuals or as a corporate body in nurturing their vertical relationships with God. These churches may grow but not by leaps and bounds because something is missing. That something is the Spirit. Some churches are of the conservative persuasion—lifting hands and hearts in joyful worship of God, nurturing their relationships with God and knocking faithfully on doors to see if people are “saved.” If you've ever been on the receiving end of one of those visits, as I have, then you know that these folks aren't interested in your spiritual relationship with God. They just want to count you as one of their successes. Their churches are growing by leaps and bounds because people get emotional highs and “feel the Spirit.” Who wouldn't want to be a part of something that feels good?

Both of these entities have good qualities and less than good qualities about them. But what about the moderates? They have the opportunity to be the best blend of both but moderates are fence sitters and peace keepers. Well, peace keepers are a good thing, you say. You are right. But, in their efforts to keep the peace over an issue, they fail to take a stand. What is that country song? I don't know if it is the title or a line from the song but it says, “You have to stand for something or you'll fall for anything!” The moderates stand for enough that they don't fall but they don't grow. They don't grow because you generally can't feel the Spirit in their churches and their service is half-shod in that 20% of the people are doing 80% of the service and they used that as an excuse. It

is not acceptable! So, Christians across the board really aren't getting the full picture of what it is to be Christian.

To be Christian is to live! Psalm 122 would suggest to us that to live is to choose to be in relationship with God. That sort of relationship requires a constant awareness of God's presence. For the church to grow, the church has to become Christian again. How does it do that? That depends on every individual that makes up the church. You and me.

To fully experience that awareness of God and to fully live, it is our job to thirst after God in such a way that our days are not complete unless we have stopped to reflect on life, on God and on God's intersections with our lives. Our days should not be complete until we have sat down and prayed—talked to God and emptied the stuff of our lives before Him. Our days should not be complete until we have meditated and listened for God's movement in our lives. Let me say a word about meditation. I can hear some of you now. Meditation?! That's touchy-feely stuff. It's not for me. I don't know how to do it. If you can find some other way to listen to God, then do it. Meditation is the only way that I know. Folks, if we aren't listening to God, we don't have a relationship with him. It is just that simple. Our days should have some sort of worship component to them and every week we should find a way to worship in community. We cannot be Christians in isolation. Here is where I am preaching to the choir. So, it becomes your job to go out and to say to every person who was not here today. "We cannot be Christians in isolation!" Tell them that they have to come to church because in community we are able to live out what has been happening in our individual journeys. We are able to share the fruits of God's Spirit bubbling up within us and to witness the same thing happening in others. In community, we learn more about the Spirit of God by seeing that Spirit at work in the lives of the people whom we choose to call brother and sister than we could ever learn on our own.

We should say with the psalmist, "let us go into the house of the Lord" and we should be glad about it because we should recognize that the house of the Lord is our spiritual gas station and we are spiritual gas tanks. We cannot make our way through this life without finding spiritual fuel in the context of a worshipping community.

And when we are the gathered community, as we are in this moment, we should be offering security and support for one another. We should be the walls of Jerusalem to each other. In so doing, we should find the oneness that comes when a community of faith can look beyond its own individual circumstances and be united. That only comes when we live by love.

Eugene Peterson's translation in contemporary English utilizes our current vernacular so that we dare not miss what love is. Let me invite you to use this as a check list for how you are doing on love. Listen to each definition and in your mind, say yes I've got that down or no I don't. Here the words: "Love never gives up, cares more for others than for self, doesn't want what it doesn't have, doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always 'me first', doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, keeps going to the end. Love never dies."

How did you do? Truthfully, I did not check them all off. When the gathered community gets what love is, when the gathered community can implement that love in

their lives both individually and corporately, then there will be no need for Jerusalem's walls of security. The community will break forth and carry the song of the pilgrims, "Peace be within you," to every soul beyond its doors. The community will recognize God's constant presence and the community that we call the church will live in ways we never imagined because it will no longer be driving its own path. The Spirit will be its chauffeur!

George Barna is right. The church is on the decline but it doesn't have to be because the church is never without hope.

It is my hope that we will all see this holy ground as our own spiritual gas station. It is my hope that we will see ourselves as spiritual gas tanks who offer our gifts to others for their refueling and as a byproduct refuel ourselves. It is my hope that we will see God within each other and that our automatic response will be the confession of God's gracious blessing. When we do those things, St. John's Baptist Church will have redefined Christianity and we will simply live in the awareness of God. May we be equal to the task! Amen and amen.

(Note: Thanks go to the following people for their contributions in discussion of this scripture prior to its writing: Lou Fuller, Leslie Bragg, Clarence Eden, and Carol Taylor)