

## September 12, 2021 (Rally Day) | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Psalm 116](#)

TITLE: Intervals of Faith – Minor 3<sup>rd</sup>: Lament & Hope

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Think about your favorite Christmas carols and I'll wager that almost every one of them is in a major key in the hymnbook. Silent Night—B flat major; The First Nowell, Joy to the World—D major; Go Tell it on the Mountain, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, O Little Town of Bethlehem—all of them in F major. Jesus' birth is God coming to us in a Savior, a story fittingly sung about in major keys. But there is one carol in e minor—"What Child is This." Its opening notes are built around a minor chord, and the first two notes of its melody form the interval of a minor 3<sup>rd</sup>. It is an evocative composition in a minor key. *What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping?* You immediately picture a vulnerable child and a young mother, quiet and alone in a rude stable in a world that has not graciously welcomed their presence.

The opening minor third tells you that this story will not unfold with angel songs and shouts of joy, but rather with an honest acknowledgment that life isn't always easy. Government power forced a long ride from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Childbirth happened away from the midwives and women helpers. Poverty and beds of straw are all that was available that dark Christmas eve. Now, it is true that once the child is identified—*This, this is Christ the King whom shepherds guard and angels sing*—the song moves to a major key. It moves to praise and expresses a deep hope. But the verse then returns back to e minor—to that quiet, reflective minor key best-suited for naming our laments and our fears.

Life isn't always easy. That could practically be the slogan for the past 18 months. Yes, we are back in the sanctuary and the choir's back in the chancel; yes, we are holding familiar bulletins and hymnals, and children and adults alike are gathering once more for Sunday School. Yet we're keeping our distance and wearing masks and still unsure how to navigate life amid the lingering minor-key reality of Covid. Even as many of you are back in your familiar pew, many others are doing church remotely, watching from home. Even as we celebrate another Rally Day in our church's life, we lament how over the past months we weren't here for funerals and weddings. Nor have we been traveling, visiting family or attending reunions. We haven't been to concerts, plays, or movies.

And when we look around our world, there has been much to lament these past months—from a divisive election to a literal insurrection in Washington; a soul-rending season of racial injustice peaking with the murder of George Floyd; months and months of wildfires, hurricanes and floods; natural disasters in Haiti, Europe, Asia; a painfully flawed withdrawal from Afghanistan. All of it or at least much of it feels like life lived in a minor key. Yes, there have been moments of beauty and C major happiness and peace. But overall it's been a long season of minor 3<sup>rd</sup> faith—of loss and lament.

In the book of psalms, there are psalms of lament and psalms of thanksgiving. In the first type, the psalmist names the trouble and then petitions God for help. In the second,

the psalmist acknowledges there have been troubles, but God has heard our prayer and brought us safely through the season of struggle. Psalm 116 is officially a psalm of thanksgiving. Early on it names the pains endured—the poet describes being caught in the snares and traps of death itself, in the grips of hell causing deep distress and anguish. It led the psalmist to cry out, “Lord, I pray, save my life!”

But remember how the psalm began. Its opening words were: *I love the Lord who has heard my voice and my supplications; whose ear has been inclined to me.* Isaac Watts paraphrased those words in the hymn we just sang: *I love the Lord who heard my cry and pitied every groan; long as I live and troubles rise, I'll hasten to God's throne.* You all sang it beautifully, but if you want to hear someone really sing that hymn, listen to Whitney Houston's version from the movie *The Preacher's Wife*. Anyway, in a time of trouble, the psalmist “hastens to God's throne,” prays to the Lord.

But how do you pray to God during the minor key moments of life? Well, you pray honestly. You name what is on your heart as best you can. You may be in the valley of the shadow of death—physically facing death, emotionally or spiritually facing death, addiction tempted, financially insecure, vocationally unhappy, or exhausted in body and soul. You name your situation for God—and if you can't do so in words, you can sit before God and simply open your heart in silence. Eugene Peterson has said, *Prayer is a joining of realities, making a live connection between the place we find ourselves and the God who is finding us.*<sup>1</sup> God wants this connection. Psalm 116:2 says *God inclined God's ear to me.* Imagine that—God desires to draw near, to listen, like a mother comforting a child on her lap. That is the posture of prayer—of being held, of a God who inclines God's ear, of words spoken from the heart, whether with tears or heavy sighs, yet through it all having the trust that, yes, God hears, God acts, and God loves.

You may not find it easy to pray in the hard moments of your life. All you may see before you is injustice and inequity, disaster and divisiveness, Covid and calamities. Know that when you pray to God, it is right to lament these things before the Lord. But I'd have you also hold onto the wisdom of people like Russell Ellis. Russ Ellis is an 86 year old academic who lives in Berkeley, California. He's an African American man who was a track star, an architecture professor, a vice chancellor—and more recently a man who decided to record an album of 11 original songs. This interesting choice got the attention of the media; and at one point in an interview, he was asked: What do you wish you'd known about life when you were younger? Ellis paused for a moment and then said, “Life is shorter than you think and longer than you think.”

Consider that for a moment. “Life is shorter than you think.” Our time on earth is precious and short. Don't take your days for granted. Do what you love now—tell those you love that you love them now—life is short. But also take a breath and remember “life is longer than you think.” A lot can be done in a day, a week, a year. Ellis ran track, mastered architecture, led a university, painted pictures, carved stones, and yes, recorded an album of original songs. As he put it, “I'm happy to have used my time in so many different ways—ways that connected me to the world, to people.”<sup>2</sup> None of his accomplishments diminishes the troubles and losses Ellis endured along the way. But

taking the long view on life led him to record an album, to laugh with friends, to find peace in this world.

Psalms of thanksgiving, like Psalm 116, name the lament and then take the long view by naming the God who hears our prayer and holds us safe for the long road ahead. Psalm 116, verses 5-7 say, *Gracious and merciful is our God...when I was brought low, God saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.* Yes, there are seasons of lament and loss, but we bring those things to the Lord in prayer—in humility and quiet—knowing ours is a God who inclines an ear, who holds us safe, who will never leave or forsake us. In that promise we move from lament to hope, for life is longer than you think.

Now back to where we started. There is an incredible richness captured in that simple Christmas carol built around a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> interval. It doesn't gloss over the darkness of those days of Roman oppression and King Herod's jealous rage, days of uncertainty and inhospitality when a child was born to a young girl and a nervous husband in a backwater town far removed from royal palaces. In the same way, the songs of our lives cannot gloss over moments of loss and lament. We too carry scars; we too have known struggle and rejection; we have prayed, "O Lord, save my life." Yet lament is just one song on the album of our life. The rich orchestration of our life has been intentionally composed by God with minor and major chords, with spirits of expectancy and hope, with a love we can trust.

We do not wish away the minor 3<sup>rd</sup> intervals of our life. Lament is part of who we are. But in the end, the lament gives way to trust and hope. In closing, hear once more this psalm of faith: *What shall I return to the Lord for all God's goodness to me? I will call on the name of the Lord; I will lift up the cup of salvation; I will pay my vows to the Lord, offering up my thanksgiving in the courts of the most high and the presence of all people. I will praise the Lord!*

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Article/interview by Chris Colin, *New York Times*, August 17, 2021.