

Some days, I can't believe you're here. Don't get me wrong — I *know* you're out there. But when I consider that the entire expanse of the internet is at your disposal, I am amazed that you choose to come to church. I am in awe that you continue to join in this community — that you are willing to take it on faith that we all are here.

This leads me to wonder: *why are you here?* I can imagine some of your answers: that worship on Sundays keeps your days from running together; that hearing this music gives you a chance to breathe deep and let your spirit soar; that whether your home is quiet or crowded, you need to know that you are not alone. What brought you here today? When did you decide to set aside time each week for ancient poetry and parables, prayers that recall the world's pain, and words of inspiration that hope you will love others just as much as you love yourself?

If, for you, there is a moment — I want to know! I want to hear this Good News, this testimony of how God is at work in your life. If you are not already in the habit of telling this story to anyone who will listen, I hope you will start. I hope you begin in whatever way feels possible, and I hope you keep proclaiming the goodness of God's transformation in your life — because we need to hear it. If, for you, there is a moment when God's love was suddenly made apparent to you and you decided to be a Christian, I want to hear it. But I suspect that for many of us, myself included, this question — *when did you decide* — is difficult to answer.

The opening line of our psalm this morning is written in the language of prayer, addressed directly to God. *To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!* What stands out to me is not the way that God is glorified on a throne, but the way the psalmist talks about herself. *To you I lift up my eyes*, the psalmist says. *I lift up*

— not, “I have lifted” or “I will lift,” but *I lift up*. Like it’s a habit. I wake up, I eat, I sleep, I lift up my eyes — these are the things I do daily, practically without thinking.

I was raised going to church. My family certainly did not attend every week throughout my childhood, but it was a habit. It was a perfectly ordinary Sunday when we went to church, and we had a whole routine that made those mornings complete — including sitting in the same pew and coming home to clean the house. To be sure, as a young person I was taught core tenants of the Christian faith, but from my child-eyes, this is what we did because it’s what we did.

To you I lift up my eyes, the psalmist says, like it’s a habit. The psalmist has lived her life turning to God in prayer simply because it’s what she does. Perhaps she would even articulate a theology about not being our own source of life and strength. But then — things shift. Things shift and the psalmist says, *our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us*. Something in the psalmist’s life has changed, and she no longer turns to God in prayer simply because it is is a habit. She now finds herself turning to God because she is *seeking* something, and she will return again and again until she is sure of its presence.

This shift — from habit to seeking — happened for me during my first weeks of college, my first steps into young adulthood. In the loneliness of being apart from the people I loved, and the uncertainty and possibility of how the next months and years of my life would unfold, I sought companionship, familiar hymns, and a place where I could hear the Gospel connected to the tumultuous world around us. I sought a taste of God’s mercy and grace.

The first Sunday that I arrived for church, I looked through the windows and saw people milling around for coffee hour, and I realized I was too late for the service. I didn't even bother going in, I just turned around and left. I had gotten up that morning seeking God's mercy proclaimed in scripture and song, in Communion and community — and I got none of it. In my first moment newly seeking out the habit I had long known, I did not catch a glimmer of God's grace.

*Our eyes look to the Lord our God, **until** he has mercy on us.* The psalmist reminds me that when we seek something as great, and as important, as God's mercy and grace, we keep looking. We continue to turn our gaze until the love of God is made known in our life.

The next Sunday, I again hoped for a glimpse of God's abiding presence in worship. I double checked the church's website, and I arrived on time. I was greeted warmly by a family whose own daughter was away at college. I felt myself once again part of a community as we all rose and sang and sat and prayed and breathed together. I heard the familiar words of a Gospel story given new life as they were spoken anew in that time and place, stirring each of us to live the faith God calls us to. In short: I found the grace that I was looking for.

Over the course of the week that followed, I discovered that it wasn't enough. I still felt alone, and I continued to be my own harshest critic when it came to making new friends. I was still looking for a community where I felt like I belonged, and I felt bitter toward people who seemed to have found such belonging quickly and easily. I still resented the class I was stuck with when course registration hadn't gone my way, and I continued to judge my classmates who appeared to enjoy it. By the time Sunday

came back around, I found I was just as hungry for God’s presence in my life as I had been a week earlier. In short, as the psalmist says: *Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.*

Is that why you are here? Because you — like me, like this psalmist thousands of years ago — have had more than enough of contempt and need to turn your gaze toward God? Are you here because you need a balm to ease the apathy you feel now that your days have run together? Do you come to worship in order to transform the resentment you feel toward those who seem not to notice the surging loss of life? Are you here to pray because your contempt for people who did not vote like you is beyond what you can handle alone? Do you turn your face to God in order to hand over your doubt and shame at whether you are doing enough when it comes to keeping your family safe, or dismantling white supremacy, or simply getting from day to day?

To you I lift up my eyes, this psalm begins, praying out of habit. *Our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt*, praying with a persistent seeking, ready for something to change. The psalmist knows both habit and seeking. The psalmists’ faith relies on both — and I think ours does too. It is our daily routines, the things that we can do without thinking, that determine how we will respond in times of trouble — you know this, you who have had your daily routines disrupted again and again these past months. But it is also in times of trouble that we seek new habits to sustain us — I don’t have to tell you this either, you who have weekly Zoom calls across timezones and take daily walks around the neighborhood and who are worshipping this morning in pajamas.

We are living in a moment where we are perhaps uniquely aware of our habits and the effects they have on us: these past months have brought a newfound consciousness to who we interact with, to how the members of our household spend their time, to how often we leave the house and for what purpose. In this time of attuning ourselves to the things we used to do without thinking, I wonder what you have noticed about your life of faith? Perhaps you have developed a new morning ritual of quiet contemplation, or you have been a regular sandwich-maker for the Father Bill’s lunch ministry, or you join others in engaging with scripture during the weekly bible study. Perhaps you find the habits of faith that used to carry you through the week — like singing in the choir or sharing a meal with others — have fallen out from under you. And what about the habits of your bank account? Is regular giving to the church something you do without thinking?

In some sense, recurring, automatic donations to the church fall well below the other lofty things God calls us to — things like extending forgiveness 77 times; testifying to the never-ending love of God; feeding the hungry; speaking with conviction about hard things and listening with equal regard; loving our neighbor as ourselves. These lofty things are, in part, the work of the church that we come together to do. Recurring, automatic donations to the church — whether by starting to give regularly or discerning an increase to your contribution — does more than *fund* the work of the church. Recurring, automatic donations *are part* of the work of the church, because they — among worship and small groups and preparing lunches — are a habit of faith, and we are in the business of joining together for practices that make up a Christian life.

Our various habits of faith allow us to turn to God, again and again — because we need to see God’s mercy, again and again. Over and over, our aspiring to the lofty work of faith requires that we be confronted with mercy — for ourselves and for others when we do not meet our highest expectations. *Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.* Cultivating the habits of faith — including weekly worship and recurring, automatic donations — enables us to keep looking. We continue to turn our gaze until the love of God is made known in our lives.

I do not know what the future will hold, but I imagine that there will be contempt. I know that I will judge myself and others too harshly, and I know that the world will continue to experience pains that I resent. I do not know what the future will hold, but I believe that there will be mercy: I believe that there will be people showing up with love and extending a hand of forgiveness and enacting a world of justice. I do not know all that the future will hold, but I believe that, even in the contempt, there will be people reflecting God’s mercy because they — because *you* — have the habits of faith that make this possible.