

Children's Sabbath
Psalm 121
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
October 16, 2022
Rev. Kara Seaton

On a Monday evening this past summer, there was a collision between a bicycle and a car, at the intersection just east of the church. Both Pastor Jill and I stepped outside to see if there was any assistance we could offer. Emergency services had been called, a first aid kit and blankets had been gathered and there were a few people already tending to the man who was injured. There was little for us to do but to pray.

As Jill stepped aside to talk to one of the neighbors, I noticed a girl, elementary age, in a minivan that was stopped at the scene of the accident. She was hanging out the window, looking on to the scene that was scary to me, and I assumed would be frightening to her. I asked if she was okay, to which she said yes and said that her mom, a nurse practitioner, was with the injured man. She asked me if I knew what happened, to which I responded no, but still I could see the worry and concern in this child's face. So I offered what I could, calling attention to all the helpers on the scene. I pointed out her mom as a helper, who was tending to the injured man. I pointed out the sirens we could hear in the background, indicating emergency personnel on their way. I pointed out the person that brought a blanket over, and the man who was on the phone with 911 dispatchers. I mentioned how brave she was being, staying in the car and being patient.

Looking for the helpers, was made well known by Fred Rogers, musician, writer, puppeteer and ordained minister...best known for his role as creator and host of "Mister Roger's Neighborhood"-a TV show many of us are familiar with, that embraced children's curiosity of the world, promoted kindness to ones neighbors, and stressed the importance of feelings.

Mr. Rogers was honest with children about how hard life can be, but he always found a reason for hope and resilience.¹ Let me share with you the quote by Mr. Rogers about the helpers, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

This advice is intended for young children, who are small and fragile, children who look to adults for everything from daily care to emergency rescue.² "Looking for helpers," does not promise bad things won't happen, but rather teaches children to look for the helpers when bad things do happen. It teaches us to look for all the many ways, big and small, that people come together, to take care of others. Those people might be emergency personnel, trained adults in the community, or simply everyday people doing what they can. Helpers are people of all ages, skin colors and abilities. Children and teenagers can be helpers too.

As a parent and someone who is vocationally drawn to literature and articles about working with children, I can attest that the "look for the helpers" strategy has been shared a lot in recent years, as tragedy and violence permeates every media outlet - the pandemic, racial tensions, natural disasters, political violence and war, seem to play on repeat. No matter how

much we try to shield our children, they know. “Look for the helpers” is great advice, as it serves as a distraction and redirects attention to focus on something positive. It also encourages children to look for people who can help – which is not only a great skill to have, it can provide some comfort. But this advice was intended as a first step for processing tragedy with our young people. This advice was never meant to be a fix all.

Today is Children’s Sabbath, a day when we are asked to pay special attention to the problems facing children, teens and their families. While most children in this congregation are not the children of the statistics we heard earlier in the service, it doesn’t mean that the children in our midst don’t have hardships and very real needs, because they do. Children and teens of today are growing up in a world that many of us could not have imagined when we were their ages - and friends, it is hard for them.

Today we are asked to acknowledge that all children are real, full and complete people. The ones we know, and the ones we don’t know – are all precious children of God. In acknowledging that, we also must acknowledge that some children are born into this world to parents who don’t have the resources to care for them. Many are children who will face discrimination their whole lives, due to the color of their skin. There are children who are homeless or facing homelessness, children who are hungry, whose families have to choose between paying the electric bill or food. Children whose parents are undocumented, whose families are separated or who live daily with the threat of their families being torn apart. Children who for many reasons, don’t experience comfort and security in their homes. Children who have never learned to trust adults, because they’ve never had an adult they could depend on. The needs of children are real, and the advice of “look for the helpers,” doesn’t fix their problems. It doesn’t provide them with shelter or food, it doesn’t assure them safety or love or protection.

Unicef, a global child advocacy organization, reports in their “Prospects for children 2022:” 2022 sees us entering a third year of the pandemic, and the harm done to children is increasingly evident: A record rise in child poverty. Setbacks to progress on routine vaccinations. Disruption to education for an entire generation. ~~That harm has emerged as an unintended side effect of the world's efforts to manage the crisis.~~ Record humanitarian needs are forecast in 2022. But children and young people express greater optimism for the future.³ Hear that again, **children and young people express greater optimism for the future.**

Today, Maya read Psalm 121 for us. This psalm, considered one of the Psalms of Ascent, was likely chanted or sung by Israelites making pilgrimages to Jerusalem – as was customary. And as Jerusalem sits quite literally on a hill, the Israelites would have had to travel “up” ...and that journey, in the desert, likely was not an easy one.

The words of the psalm are beautifully woven together, creating reassurance and comfort for the traveler. They contain the instructions to look to God as our creator, protector and guide. As we read the psalm today, some may struggle with what the words mean to us, while others may embrace the words as offering hope and a promise of God’s presence with us.

It's natural and normal to feel overwhelmed or perhaps even numbed by tragedy, violence and chaos that we see, hear or learn about each day. And it's natural to feel overwhelmed by the statistics we heard today, by the reality of all the many problems facing children, teens and families. It's expected that we may feel like these issues are too complex for us to really make a difference. And on top of that, we are tired. We are tired from the pandemic, racial tensions, gun violence and war. There is no doubt that we have an upward journey facing us. Yet today, I find hope in this passage, and I hope you will too.

In the uncertainty and fatigue, may the psalm remind us to turn to God for guidance and wisdom. Using the metaphor of our lives as a journey, God promises to walk with us, on our travels. While no one...not the Israelites who chanted this psalm, nor us today, are promised the absence of challenge or even tragedy along the way, we are promised God's presence. We are also reminded time and time again throughout scripture, that we can be God's presence for others.

But what do we do, where do we start? In Bible study last week we talked about Psalm 121 and the occasion of Children's Sabbath, and towards the end of our time, a participant, posed the question, "how can we be helpers for children?" We spent some time talking about how those helpers have looked different over time, and how they may look different for every child. I love that this question was asked as it is an important one. Because, if we are telling children to look for the helpers, we need to make sure they will always see them. How can we be helpers? How can we inspire others to be helpers too?

*"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world.
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours."
(quote with you from Saint Teresa of Avila)⁴*

On this Children's Sabbath, may we hear and heed the call of our faith, to protect the most vulnerable. May we accept the reality that children everywhere need us to do the work to create a better world for them. The "look for the helpers" advice was not meant for us, as adults. Perhaps the advice for us would be, "be the helpers!"

So let us commit to sharing love far and wide, let us commit to the work so that every child might know justice, and let us commit to living lives that show every child that there are helpers all around them. Amen.

- 1) Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints, by Daneen Akers (Watchfire Media)
- 2) The fetishization of Mr. Rogers' 'Look for the helpers:' Turning the reassuring line for children into a meme for adults should make everyone uncomfortable, by Ian Bogost, October 29, 2018 (theatlantic.com)
- 3) UNICEF, Prospects for Children 2022 (unicef.org)
- 4) Saint Teresa of Jesús, Saint Teresa of Ávila, (goodreads.com)