

## *“Intentions of the Heart”*

Psalm 15, Selections of Mark 7  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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Yesterday was the 58<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, when Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about his dream in front of a crowd of 200,000 which included the line: “With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.” “Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope” is engraved on the Dr. King memorial on the mall and his image is emerging from a roughly cut mountain behind him.

At the March on Washington in 1963 (don’t know if this same song was sung yesterday at any of the Voting Rights marches held around the country) the Freedom Singers sang *We Shall Not Be Moved*, in the face of ongoing violence against black people, beatings, discriminatory laws, prejudice, eighteen months before John Lewis almost lost his life on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the singers sang *We Shall Not Be Moved*. In the midst of all kinds of signs of despair, of all kinds of ways their bodies would be physically moved by others bent on doing them harm, they spoke of stones of hope and sang of steady ground.

They looked to the words of a people who also knew something about slavery, wilderness, persecution, oppression, violence, but who also knew that God gave them a way to be unshaken and unmoved in the most difficult of contexts. It is not just Psalm 15, more than 20 of them have some version of the word for being moved, shaken, slipping, falling, faltering with a big Will Not in front of it.

16:8 I keep the LORD always before me;

because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

62:6 God is my rock and my salvation, I shall not be moved.

94:8 When I thought, “My foot is slipping,”

your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up.

112:6 For the righteous will never be moved;

they will be remembered forever.

Why does a people write so many songs and prayers to God with images of being unmoved, unfaltering, unshakeable, non-slipping, not tottering – all the ways this word is translated in the Psalms? Because they are finding it hard to be that way, because their current footing is unsure, their lives shaky, their steps faltering, from real fear, threats to safety, oppression, political instability, confusion of what to do next, consequences of sin, emotional turmoil. To name a few of the things we know the Israelites dealt with in the time of the writing of the Psalms.

In the Psalms they ask for God's help, lament what is hard, remind themselves of God's presence, challenge the community what living as God's covenant community should look like, and proclaim that no matter what happens, they can't ultimately be shaken, even to the point of violence and death, because ultimately they belong to God and that is a forever kind of thing.

The answer to the question at the beginning of the Psalm, O Lord, who may abide in your tent? and O Lord, who may dwell on your holy hill? isn't only those who follow the precepts of verses 2-5 perfectly, because there is no one who will. We know enough of the stories of the leaders of the Israelites to know that none of them would be said to have walked blamelessly – and those of you who participated in the Adult Sunday School class, know all about why that is true for the person who is said to have written this Psalm. At the very top it says, A Psalm of David. He would certainly be ruling himself out pretty quickly, he whose afternoon walk on a roof was far from blameless, who needed Nathan's help for the depths of which he didn't do what was right and hid the truth even from his own heart.

O Lord, who then, may abide in your tent and dwell on your holy hill? those whose lives are being formed in the direction of all that is right in the eyes of God, who read that list of attributes and think it is worthy of their life's pursuit, whose intentions of the heart turn towards this list in Psalm 15 and away from Jesus' list of things like: wickedness, avarice, theft, licentiousness at the end of the passage Rachel presented. Those who know that the more time they spend on the journey of their life abiding and dwelling with God, the more unmove-able in their soul they will be when the path gets shaky. When life feels unsteady.

My conversations with people this week, within and without the church, have been about feeling a shakiness. Afghanistan, the bombing, 170 dead including 13 US soldiers, The refugee needs, figuring out how we can best help, thinking about girls in school there, maybe the same age as my daughters wondering what will happen to them. 50,000 homes in Haiti destroyed, nearly 1,500 lives lost in the earthquake, Category 4 hurricane Ida making landfall in Louisiana about now, 92 large wildfires burning 2.5 million acres, 7 states under air quality alerts: Covid 19 hospitalizations are the highest in 8 months, deaths up 23% in a week, pediatrics cases rising, political arguments about masks that end up in school board meetings and classrooms: Statistics that show disproportionate negative outcomes based on race: who dies from Covid, wage gaps, neighborhoods most impacted by environmental pollutants getting stopped by police.

A friend from McLean just dropped his oldest child off at college and told me that his nine-year old-daughter gave her brother a goodbye hug and turned back to tell him one last thing as she walked out the door – which was be careful if you get pulled over by the police, remember what to do.

And then there are all the personal things that are shaky, re-navigating Covid precautions at work or home, or church: getting kids to school when the buses didn't arrive last week, cancelling plans that have been canceled many times before – or going through

any physical, mental, spiritual challenge. And there is our building, which itself is all shook up too. navigating bathrooms, parking, the lack of accessibility, no Narthex carpet for kids to have an easy place to go. I am sure there is more that could be on that list, but that is plenty, enough to pile up quite a mountain of despair. In moments like this, we might want to just go into that tent and close the door behind us, climb the Holy Hill and never come back down.

But, of course, that is not how it works; the tent refers to the tabernacle, how the people of God carried a visible reminder of the presence of God with them wherever they went, the people weren't to remove themselves from all that was hard around them but to head right in, because God was going to be right there with them.

And the Holy Hill may be any of the mounts where people met God, Moses on Sinai, Elijah on Carmel, the temple in Jerusalem, where a dedicated time of rest and renewal in God's presence prepared them for heading right back down and back into their community to face together whatever was hard or difficult, but with spirits that would not be easily moved or shook.

If I am going to watch reality competition on TV, I don't watch housing renovations on HDTV, or cooking shows, despite how many people have told me how good the great British bake-off is. I tend more towards America Ninja Warrior, or if I am being honest with the truth of my heart, Wipeout. People needing to keep moving through obstacles that are slippery, soapy, bounce them off course, where floors crumble beneath them and footholds are hard to find.

Life can feel that way sometimes, that obstacles come quicker than we can duck them, the floor shifts faster than we can jump to safety. But if we are putting ourselves in the presence of God, as our abiding dwelling place, as the partner on all of our sojourns, if we set the intentions of our heart on reaching the high bar of Psalm 15, in how we walk in the world – our very presence and what we do, what we say, and in what we are willing to give or give up for another, then we will face all that threatens our footing with the confidence of one who, ultimately, cannot be shaken or moved.

It would like we are Wipeout contestants with a harness that keep us moving through, no matter how slippery and soapy it gets, that lifts us up when the ground shakes, and even when we fall, fall as far as far can be, finds us a safe resting place, a stone of hope, a green pasture beside still waters.