

“Prayer for Level Ground”
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Psalm 26

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San Dimas Community UCC

Psalm 26 reads like a resume for the righteous. The Psalmist lists all the ways in which he is worthy; choose me: “I have trusted without wavering.” Choose me: I have kept far away from bad company. I am pure: I have washed my hands in ritual acts of purity. I am a really good person, so may good come to me through you, O God. The Psalmist describes life as easily a choice between right or wrong--no middle ground, no more than one right answer. There’s a certain security in this Psalmist world view. He does right; he stays far away from evil; therefore, he asks unabashedly for vindication. Would that all our spiritual resumes be so impressive.

The Psalmist echos the great writer of Deuteronomy in which the community of Israel is called to *choose this day who you will serve; choose life or choose death*. I love that verse; that clear call to *choose life* because we so often choose those things that result in little deaths throughout our lives rather than to choosing the abundant life that God longs for us to know.

Yet, the Deuteronomic voice can be interpreted as saying: *if I only choose correctly, many blessings will befall me. It can be twisted to sound like the popular prosperity gospel*. In fact, Israel believed that “as a community of people” they had simply not chosen correctly; therefore bad things happened to them. But, God’s movement in their history (and God’s movement in our history) is more complicated. The rain falls on the just and unjust, and just because we present God a resume of righteousness, does not necessarily mean that life will always go like we want it to. And even the Psalmist seems to have an awareness that life is complicated because he states his case and then asks God to *redeem me, and be gracious to me. My foot stands on level ground*. And whatever happens, whether vindicated or not, the Psalmist continues: *in the great congregation I will bless the Lord. I will go around your altar singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all your wondrous deeds*.

My attention was captured by the phrase: *My foot stands on level ground*. This past week creation has been rocked by earthquake, typhoon, and tsunami. People in far away places literally “felt the earth shake under their feet.” The consequences have been devastating. How they must have wished for level ground to stand on, ground that did not shake, ground that did not wash away from beneath them.

Today on World Communion Sunday, we cannot help but think about and pray for all whose lives have been devastated this past week. The first disaster, Typhoon Ketsana, roared across the Philippines, Vietnam and Cambodia. By Monday, Sept. 28, more than 300 people were confirmed dead. Local leaders are fearful that the number will rise. In the Philippines, Ketsana caused the worst flooding in 40 years. Officials said 2.3 million homes were flooded. In Vietnam and Cambodia the storm destroyed or damaged more than 300,000 homes and flattened crops. The UCC is providing help through our partners: the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, and Church World Service (CWS). Then on Tuesday morning, Samoa, American Samoa, and Tonga reeled from the effects of a deep sea earthquake-triggered tsunami. More than 100 people are dead, with officials concerned that the toll will rise as workers reach the villages submerged by the waves. Cars, debris, bodies, and parts of buildings were strewn over the area as the waves receded. A mother in Samoa with four

young children clung to a tree when the waves came, but was not able to hold on to all of them; two drowned and one was injured. Many of the dead are children. They were walking along the beach roads to school. Elderly people were hit, since they were not able to run. Children and elderly are especially in need of level ground. On Wednesday afternoon, Sept. 30, and Thursday morning, Oct. 1, two earthquakes hit Indonesia. As of Thursday afternoon, the death toll from the Indonesian quakes had reached more than 1,100 people. Our UCC's One Great Hour of Sharing administrator said the following: "the United Church of Christ responds to a disaster, on average, about once every two-and-a-half days. To have three major disasters, in the same general area of the world, three days in a row is unprecedented in my experience," she said continues. "I'm grateful we have such a large, capable network of partners who are able to respond immediately, with assistance from OGHS gifts."

Today we are already scheduled to receive our Neighbors in Need offering, and to participate in the Walk for the Hungry, and now the UCC has set a goal of \$250,000 for recovery in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. It's a lot to ask at once, and yet, yesterday I looked around my lovely home and I wondered *if an earthquake destroyed this, would anyone think of me?* For today, at least, I dwell on level ground; and I can pray for level ground *for others*, through my generosity.

My prayer for level ground is also for spiritual level ground. Sometimes I wonder if it's just because I'm getting older, but the world seems the opposite of level, not at all stable, subject to change at any moment by job losses, decisions made on Wall Street, or disappointment at the latest scandal of someone we thought we might be able trust. My spirit longs for spiritual level ground.

There's a song we used to sing at the Mentone UCC that I was particularly fond of. It was called "I'm comin' up the rough side of the mountain." The song goes: *Oh Lord, I'm strivin', tryin' to make it through this barren land, but as I go from day to day, I can hear my Savior say, "trust me child, come on and hold my hand." I'm comin' up on the rough side of the mountain, I must hold to God, His powerful hand. I'm comin' up on the rough side of the mountain, I'm doin' my best to make it in.*

Climbing mountains is hard work whether rough or smooth. In fact, sometimes the mountains with jagged edges unexpectedly provide a less slippery footing, perhaps a nubby patch or craggy spot for your foot to grab hold to. But what a relief to get to that place where our feet stand on level ground! And whether the ground is level or stripped out from under us, may we have the vision to join the Psalmist and *sing a loud song of thanksgiving, telling of God's wondrous deeds* because no matter what our situation, what is good in our lives is a gift from God, and no matter how rough our path, God is with us. On this Word Communion Sunday, let us give thanks for God's presence among us.