

Lift Up Your Hearts, Pt. 1
Following the Upward Call
Colossians 3: 1-3; Philippians 3: 14

**First Presbyterian Church
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We hear a lot of instructions about paying attention. “Heads up!” they always yelled on the field when an errant ball was streaking our way. That seemed a strange warning to me. Somewhere in the sky an out of the control kick ball, or worse, a baseball, was plummeting downward. Why would I look skyward just to get a ball in my face? Ducking seemed the better course of action. But I understand what the cry meant: look out, there’s an incoming object. It was a call to pay attention.

So was this constant exhortation from coaches, “Listen up!” They called us to stop chattering and focus. Important information was being dispensed. If you want to play in this game, you need to know this. Disregard of what coach says guarantees you’ll be watching the game from the bench.

“Get your head out of your cereal bowl!” We were seldom actually eating breakfast when my friend said that, but the meaning was clear. Snap back to reality. Look at a world bigger than your immediate appetite. Concentrate.

Every teacher or parent, coach or manager knows that keeping people focused is a major undertaking. This is especially true in our faith. For we worship a God who is real but not visible to the eyes. He is all the treasure of beauty and delight that we could ever want. But we have to *seek him intentionally* if we are to find him. We have to concentrate our minds to become aware of him. We have to consecrate our hearts to know him personally. That’s not easy.

Do you identify with the line of the old hymn, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.” We are easily distracted. So many people and things clamor for our attention. Then we are always either hot, cold, restless, sleepy, hungry, thirsty, trying to get home or pining to get away. “All we like sheep have gone astray,” prayed the prophet. We want to focus on God but our attention wavers.

The season of Lent provides opportunity to get intentional, with the encouragement of one another, about questing more passionately for the God who has made

himself known in Jesus Christ. The six weeks of Lent have traditionally been a time of intensified focus on Christ in preparation for Easter. Many traditions invite people to give up something for Lent, as a sign of dedication. At First Presbyterian, our emphasis has been on *adding* prayer and practices that cause us to know Jesus more deeply and serve him more robustly. That's what this series, the home groups and your book of daily readings is for.

Hearts Up!

The title of our study comes from the earliest years of Christian worship. It is the call to be engaged in a spiritual quest. For centuries, the beginning of the communion service has contained a call and a response regarding our attention. The worship leader says, "Lift up your hearts." The congregation replies, "We lift them up to the Lord." A foundational meaning of worship is looking *away* from ourselves and *toward* Jesus. We step out of daily insidencies and step towards Christ. We engage in *questing prayer*. This is prayer that travels the upward path of God's Word in search of knowing our Savior Jesus more intimately.

The call to questing prayer is rooted in Colossians 3 where Paul encourages, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." Paul calls us to turn our attention upwards toward Christ. Our head, our life, our Lord is in the heavenly realm. We are to look to him *there* for daily life *here*. We are to turn our attention to Christ to receive power and guidance, wisdom and strength for living in this world.

Another version of the opening lines of communion says it this way, "Up with your hearts!" I love how robust a command that is! It sounds like the orders a submarine commander might give: "Up periscope!" Let's see what's going on above the water where we spend most of our time. Let's see what's going on in the daylight world. Because real life is upwards. It's time for me to put my heart where my Lord is and experience more of *his* real, heavenly life in *my* daily life.

The reply in that version is, "We have them with the Lord." The mysterious wonder of worship is that though my body is on earth, my soul can be in heaven with Christ. I'm joined to him always by the Holy Spirit. But in worship and prayer I become an active participant in that reality. Of course this activity of heading God-ward, away from ourselves towards heaven is exactly what changes our lives *in this world*.

So a spiritual coach today might encourage us, “Hearts Up!” And we’d answer, “We’re there, coach! We’re with Jesus right now, thinking of him, praying to him, offering ourselves to him, and seeking him where he says he can be found: in his Word, especially as his Word is engaged in a community of believers.”

During Lent this year, we want to journey further upward toward Christ. We want to take our place with Jesus in the heavenly realm *so that* we can learn to live every day on earth with the heavenly life of Jesus flowing through us. Each day, then, we’ll be exploring how Scripture has ever led God’s people upwards towards him. Here’s how it works.

Jesus is the Destination

The jewels of our triune’s God’s beauty and wondrous plan for our salvation are found within his Word. The Bible records how God has acted to save his people. And all its pages point to the same conclusion: Jesus is our Savior and Lord. He is the joy of our desiring. He is the fulfillment of our hearts. He is the treasure for which our souls search all our lives. We find him revealed with present power in the Holy Scriptures.

Yet the beautiful truths in the Bible are not discovered unless we willingly set out on the heart’s journey upwards. God has come *down* into the words of Scripture where we can find him. But we have to open the book, ask for him to speak to us, yield our hearts and engage our minds. In other words, we quest *upwards* to find the God who has come down to save us in Jesus.

“Further up and further in!” was the phrase of quest in C.S. Lewis’ *Narnia* stories. Lewis likened our journey towards God as climbing towards the High Country. The Lord calls to us from his Word, “Come in! Come up! Seek me and find me, waiting for you here, the goal of all your deepest desire.”

Jesus is the Way

When the Son of God came into our midst as Jesus, he undertook the human quest for God. His whole life was directed upwards towards his Father. Jesus prayed constantly from his heart, often literally going up mountains to worship. Every day, Jesus directed his life God-ward by his obedience, keeping the law perfectly, all the way to the point of loving his friends, and enemies, unto death. Of course, on Easter, Jesus rose *up* from the grave. The Father commanded, the

Spirit acted, and Jesus was raised, giving him triumph over all death and evil. Finally, Jesus went up to heaven at his ascension, returning to his Father.

But though his journey back to heaven was complete, Jesus did not forget us. He did not stop being united to us. Even now in heaven he remains still joined to our humanity. He is the head and we his people are his body, joined between heaven and earth by the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus' ascension as the God-man means he has taken human being where we have never gone before: into the immediate presence of God. For Jesus' upward journey was not just for himself. He included all who are or would be joined to him by the Holy Spirit through faith. Jesus our head is in heaven. We are on earth. But he keeps us connected to him by his Spirit. And he beckons us upward to where he is. He calls to quest for him in the way we worship and live, until, at the end of these mission days of our earthly pilgrimage, we too will be taken to heaven to join him face to face forever.

The quest of Jesus for his Father, enacted by worship and obedience, meant his opening a trail for us. He is both the goal and he is the way. We quest towards him now along a path already blazed by his blood and tears, his faithfulness and love.

We are the Hikers

This Lent, we will hike along the paths of God's Word. Each of us individually, and all of us as our church, are encouraged to quest for Christ as we study his Word. We lift up our hearts to the Lord day by day. By reading, prayer, and thought, we quest to bring the beauty of the gospel story into our lives. We think of ourselves as questers on a sacred path these 42 days.

The Holy Spirit is Our Guide

The Holy Spirit keeps us united to Christ while he is in heaven and we live on earth. He actively relates us to our Lord. For, as Jesus himself said, the Spirit delights to take the things of Jesus and give them to us (John 16: 14). As we quest, the Spirit guides. He alone can open God's Word to us. He alone can lead us into all truth. He alone can effect change in us. He alone can reveal the treasure we seek. He longs for us to ask him to do this! We ask by praying for his guidance. We also ask by our devoting ourselves to the effort of seeking Christ in Scripture,

prayer and obedience. It's what we do with our time and attention that proves the earnestness of our prayers for guidance.

This Book is But a Map

This daily reader offers a reliable map to seeking God in his Word. Hikers in high places know to look for cairns, little piles of stones, left to mark the way when the trail might otherwise be lost in fog or overgrowth. One looks for the cairns to know which path is a tried and true way upwards. So each day, I've left you some spiritual cairns, some guide-stones in your upward quest through the Scriptures. Your own hiking through these passages may lead you to some different places than my suggestions. To that I'd say, "Go for it!" Trust the Spirit to lead you into the Word toward Christ. Jesus is the treasure we seek in the Scriptures. Each of you is a hiker. The Spirit is the only true guide. My notes are just a map of a way that worked for me.

20 Minutes of Quest a Day

This Lent, I'm encouraging us to devote twenty minutes every day to this quest to climb upwards toward Christ through his Word and prayer. Every morning, we follow a threefold pattern of lifting our hearts to the Lord.

1) Walk in the High Country

Read Scripture and consider comments and questions on an aspect of God's calling us upward in the events of Scripture.

Each day we begin with Paul's encouragement. I'd like to invite you to say it aloud now with me. "*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God* (Col. 3: 1).

I urge you not to skip praying aloud this sentence! The repetition allows the verse to become part of your life and will take you deeper day by day. What's more, this is a great sentence prayer to have in your heart for all of life

2) Quest Upwards by a Psalm

The Psalms are the prayer book of God's people, used by Jesus himself in his intimate relationship with his Father. For three millennia the psalms have been the reliable upward path by which our hearts and souls may climb to God. I encourage

you to pray *aloud* each day's psalm. And to read it at least twice, once to get the sense of it, and then to make it your own.

In this section there is also a daily phrase to pray so that by the end of Lent it can be embedded in our memory. Let's say it together: *Blessed be God, who daily bears us up. God is our salvation* (Psalm 68: 19). Our God is the goal of our quest and the one who actually empowers us for the journey, bearing us up every step of the way.

3) Go Further Up the Ancient Way

Lastly, each day we will read and pray quotations from the great storehouse of hymns, prayers and spiritual writings from the centuries. They will take us further upwards toward the ascended Jesus

In this section, there is also a verse to say every day. It was chosen as communicating the very heart of our Lenten study. Once more, I urge you not to skip this, but to embrace the repetition as a reliable way to press upwards into Christ. We want to join Paul in declaring, *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus* (Phil. 3: 14). He beckons to us and we reply by engaging this Lent's quest.

God is calling to us from the High Country. He wants to be known. He makes himself available, but he is not a cheap date. He doesn't give his beauty away for free; he doesn't let us treat his treasure like trash. No, he graciously gives himself to us but he requires that we seek him. He wants us to press upwards toward him. He wants us to consecrate some time in honor of him. He wants us to stretch our minds to know him. He wants to capture our hearts as we contemplate him in his Word. If you seek him, he promises he will give himself to be found. So over the next six weeks, let's journey toward Jesus through these passages and prayers. I promise that they will lead you to love him more than ever before for the way to life that he has made for you.

Quest upward, beloved!

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