

A Scary Prayer
Psalm 62:5-8; Ephesians 3:14-21
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
August 13, 2017- Commissioning of Lauren Mack for Service in Malawi
Pastor Dave Carver

To hear this message as preached in worship, please visit this site:
https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/08/sermon08-13_2017-08-13_10-23-50_t001_in1.mp3

As I begin the message, I am curious as to what we are actually doing here this morning. We are “commissioning” Lauren. We are sending her off. Why? What for? What are our hopes for Lauren Alaina Mack as she leaves Pennsylvania and heads to the Central African nation of Malawi, where she will spend a year teaching at the St. Andrews’ Mission Secondary School?

In each pew, you’ll find a pencil and some paper. Take a few moments now and just jot down your hopes for Lauren, and, if you know her, Brooke Merry in the next 12 months. What are your prayers for them? What do you hope will happen in their lives?

Now, what kinds of things did you write down? What do you hope for? Now, I want you to hold onto those cards for a moment as we continue.

As I thought about this service, and this message, and the scriptures at hand, I thought about my prayers for these two beautiful young people. Almost instinctively, I am praying that God would keep them SAFE. I’m praying that they’ll have a good time in Malawi. I’m praying that they’ll do a good job at the St. Andrew’s Missionary Secondary School, and that the kids will know more about English, and life skills, and Jesus when Lauren and Brooke get through with them...I pray that they will make a difference in Africa, and that Africa will make a difference in them.

And, you say to yourself, “Self, those are pretty good prayers. I see why he’s getting paid so much to be the pastor here...”

Paul had known the Ephesians for awhile, but not as long as I’ve known Lauren. He was praying for them as they tried to be faithful to their calling in a place that was plagued with difficulties. What does Paul pray for?

He prays in verse 16 that Jesus will strengthen the Ephesians in their inner beings SO THAT those hearts would be fit places in which Christ could dwell. He prays in verse 17 – 19 that the Ephesians, who already know something about love, will continue to be shaped and molded by that love so that...so that what? So that they will be able to grasp and to know the love of God – so that in that knowing they might be filled with the very fullness of God.

That Paul, he’s a sneaky one. You’ve got to keep your eye on him – I’m telling you.

Let’s look at my prayers. My prayers tend to be outcome-based. I want the people that I pray for to be well taken care of. I want them to have good jobs, happy marriages, and to be successful. Even when I say that I want them to make a difference, I’m saying that I want them to be able to get to the end and say, “There! I’ve done it! What next?”

But Paul? This guy is a dangerous pray-er. A far more dangerous pray-er than I ever will be. Paul’s prayer is that at the end of the day, the Ephesians will end up knowing something – being filled with something, namely, the fullness of God himself. Why is that so bad? Because whereas my prayers end up at the finish line, Paul’s prayers end up at the starting line. He prays that when it’s all said and done, the people he loves will be ready for something; that they’ll be

equipped for something; that they'll be poised and filled and eager.

Let me tell you a little something about the church of Central Africa: Presbyterian – the partners to whom we are sending Lauren. It was founded by a group of young Scottish missionaries who had become enthralled by the stories they heard from the Rev. David Livingstone. After Livingstone's death in Central Africa, Henry Henderson became the leader of the first mission to Malawi in 1876. He, along with the other leaders of that trip, John Bowie and Robert Cleland, were dead within fifteen years.

You may already know this, but the earliest missionaries from Scotland to Malawi didn't pack their things in suitcases. They packed their things in coffins. Why? Why would they do that? Well, for starters they were just being realistic. It was dangerous. Most of them died over there, and so packing your clothes in a coffin was simply an efficient way to get everything from point A to point B.

But there's more to it than that, I think. I think that another reason why they took their coffins along was that they were pretty sure that Malawi was their last stop. They were called to go to Malawi, and they went, thinking that Malawi was where things would end up for them. Again, if that's the case, then taking along a coffin is simply the prudent thing to do.

But Lauren, you won't be packing your gear in a coffin (although if you log onto casketxpress.com you can get a good deal!). You'll be more likely to have Samsonite or American Tourister. Why? Because you have budgeted for a return ticket already. We have every reason to expect that you'll be showing up at the airport a year from now and that you'll be back in this room at that point. Many of us will plan to meet you here, in fact.

So this trip of yours is really just a temporary situation. It'll be over before you know it. The blink of an eye. Twelve months – that's nothing – heck, I used to go that long without shaving.

And that's why my prayers are deficient. Because if I am praying for you to have accomplished something, to have been kept safe, to have arrived somewhere...then I'm only praying a twelve-month prayer. Hardly seems worth the breath, does it?

But what if each one of us, every day, prayed like Paul? What if we prayed that when we all get together here and celebrate the Lord's day when Lauren returns, we'd be ready for something bigger? That we'd be so infused with the love of God, so captivated by the presence of God, so filled with the fullness of God that it would make us about ready to burst out of our skins? What if we prayed that come August, you'll have *finished* your mission work in Malawi for the year, but that *each of us* will be different and *each of us* will be equipped and receptive for God's *next* call on our lives?

Ah, not so fast, Carver. How can you just throw away a sentence like, "a year is nothing..." I bet that if that was *your kid* buying that airline ticket you'd be singing a different song. How in the world are we supposed to be able to let go of those wonderful, practical prayers that we've come to expect from Pastor Dave and risk the dangerous prayers of Paul? How can we be free to be ready to live like that? How can we think of ourselves as NOT marching towards a magical finish line when everything will be "back to normal"?

I think the answer to that lies in the first scripture reading that you heard this morning. Did you hear what David read for us? "He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge."

Do you see? If it's up to us; if I'm out there trying to protect myself, to prepare myself, to figure out where in the world I'm supposed to be, then there's no way that I'll ever be able to let down my guard enough to listen to the wise counsel that comes from God. But if I really believe that it all depends on God; if I really believe that there's nothing that is going to hit me that I can't survive with God's help; that there's no problem too big for God to get me through, that God has my back...then I can spend all of my energy on getting ready for being the person that God has for me to be, and I'll trust that God will get me where he needs me when he needs me.

Lauren, I have to tell you this: it's going to be a shock when you come back from Malawi than next August. You'll leave a community in which you will find church after church packed with joyful people who have a hunger for God that compels them to show up for worship as early as 5:45 a.m. just so they get a seat...and you'll return to a culture where bored looking people show up in church twice a year in an attempt to win some brownie points with God, with their mothers, or who knows what other reason... You'll leave a nation where children carry their pencil – their one pencil – back and forth to school every day as if it were gold, and come back to a flurry of “back to school” sales that will make your head spin. You may have heard me mention that I was so overwhelmed by the cultural shock of affluence and choice when I returned from my first trip to Malawi that I could not go grocery shopping. The day I got back, I ran up to Shop & Save to grab a few things, but when I got to the toilet paper aisle I was overcome with grief or sadness or something... I stood there trying to figure out which was the best deal for toilet tissue, and how I could save money, and my mind was filled with images of the people I'd left behind in Malawi – people who had *real* difficult choices to make, and here I was trying to figure out if it was better to get Charmin or Cottonelle... And so I left a full cart of groceries

in the paper products aisle at Shop N Save because I just couldn't cope with it. Nope, I don't envy you coming back when you come back.

And it would really stink if you went to Malawi for twelve months and then you came back in August and MY prayers were answered. Man, would THAT make for a miserable Autumn. Why? Because you'd be spending all your time thinking about all the ways that Crafton Heights isn't Ntaja; you'll be missing the vibrancy of that worship; heck, you'll even miss nsima and chicken...if you got to August and thought that you were done.

But what do you think would happen to you, and to us, if in the next twelve months PAUL'S prayers were answered? THEN we'd be looking forward to an incredible 2019. Why? Because your time away will have prepared you for whatever is next for you HERE. Because your time away will prepare your friends and relatives to see you in a new light and to invite you to new challenges and new opportunities and new horizons...because instead of being finished with mission, you'll be even better prepared for it.

So, Lauren, Glenn, Cheri...whose prayers are we going to lean on? The relative safety of Pastor Dave's "keep an eye on 'em, OK God?" Or the outrageous risk of Paul's "Make us all ready, God, for the work that you have for each of us"?

So here's what I want you to do...I want you to take that card on which you have written your prayers for Lauren and Brooke. And I want you to turn it over and write out "Ephesians 3:14-21" on it. And I want you to pray that prayer for Lauren. And for Brooke. And for me. And for you.

Thank God for bold prayers and for those who are led into them. Thank God for the call that comes to the church.

Thank God for the ability to respond – in this neighborhood, in Malawi, and in every place in between. Amen.