

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: N/A

Sermon: I Lift My Eyes to the Hills (This is a reworking of a sermon preached years ago)

Psalm 121 (NKJV)

A Song of Ascents

1

I will lift up my eyes to the hills—
From whence comes my help?

2

My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.

3

He will not allow your foot to [a]be moved;
He who keeps you will not slumber.

4

Behold, He who keeps Israel
Shall neither slumber nor sleep.

5

The Lord is your keeper;
The Lord is your shade at your right hand.

6

The sun shall not strike you by day,
Nor the moon by night.

7

The Lord shall preserve you from all evil;
He shall preserve your soul.

8

The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in
From this time forth, and even forevermore.

Sermon

I grew up out in the country, right next a train track that went from the city out to the neighboring towns to haul grain, mostly. 5 or 6 trains a day, I remember. And to a six year old kid, that was awesome. When we would hear the whistle at the intersection a mile away, we would go outside on our front lawn, and wave to the engineer and caboose when they would drive on by not 40 feet away. We would always get a wave back. It was usually the same engineers making the run. We would leave coins on the track to flatten, or small rocks to set what we called, “train traps”, hoping to catch a train. One day, I caught one. The train stopped in front of our house. We ran inside. Soon enough, there was a knock on the door. I answered it, and the train engineer was standing on our doorstep. I went and got Mom, who didn’t believe me when I told her we had a special guest. Come to find out, this guy had waved to us for several years, seen us grow up, and wanted to give us a special treat. They had some time to kill, waiting for the track lines to clear up miles ahead before they could continue, and they wanted to know if we wanted to ride a real train, for about a mile or so, then they’d let us off and we’d run home. It was a different time - couldn’t do that now. We got to blow the horn, ring the bell, push in the accelerator, apply the brake and all of that. We went about a mile, he dropped us off, and we ran home as quick as we could, thankful for that special treat. I still love railroads, the idea of hopping on the tracks and going who knows where. Being a present day hobo, a pilgrim if you will - heading off to who knows where.

The heading to Psalm 121 says, "A song of ascents." This means it is a Pilgrim Psalm; this means it was sung by Jewish pilgrims as they made their way to the holy city, Jerusalem. Ascension - going up the Temple.

A pilgrimage to Jerusalem was an ambition and even an obligation of the faithful. In fact, God commanded in Exodus "Three times a year all the men are to appear before the Sovereign LORD." They were to gather in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles (cf Ex 23 & 34; Lev 23). That's why, in the New Testament, there are so many references to Jews going to Jerusalem for the Passover and other feasts (Lk 2:41; Jn 5:1; Jn 7:2). That's why when the day of Pentecost came "there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:1-11). These Jews were pilgrims.

That word "pilgrim" perfectly describes the Christian; and that word "pilgrimage" perfectly describes the Christian life. A pilgrim is someone who is traveling somewhere; a pilgrim is someone who stays in a place as a stranger or visitor. Christians are pilgrims. The Christian life is a pilgrimage. Our final citizenship is in heaven and we are but temporary dwellers on earth. Our life is a pilgrim journey to the place where we really belong. I remember the story of a visitor who went into a rabbi's home one evening. He was astonished to see that the rabbi's home was only a simple room filled with books, plus a table and a cot. The tourist asked, "Rabbi, where is your furniture?" The Rabbi replied back, "Where is yours?" The puzzled guest asked, "Mine? But I'm only a visitor here. I'm only passing through." The rabbi replied, "So am I." That's true for all of us – all Christians know that on this earth and in this body they are but pilgrims passing through on the way to eternal glory.

So how is your journey going? The psalmist knew that the pilgrim journey was not easy. To get to Jerusalem he had to cross mountains and hills, valleys and deserts. Along the way he would run into steep paths, deep ravines, overhanging cliffs, falling rocks, wild and hungry beasts, cold nights, hot days, and robbers. Usually this first verse of Psalm 121 has been misunderstood. Too often the hills or mountains are understood as Mount Zion and seen as a symbol of security, comfort, and strength. It's a real question. The realistic pilgrim looks at those mountains that stand between him and Jerusalem. As he considers the dangerous journey that awaits him as he crosses those mountains, it is only natural that he asks, "Will I get across? Will I be able to make it safely to Jerusalem? Where will I get the help and strength I need to cross those mountains?" Says the Psalmist, I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from? And, like the Psalmist, we face many dangers and difficulties along the way. Let me name some of them:

- sickness and disease, either in your own life or in the life of a loved one
- major surgery
- the death of a loved one
- the agony and pain of separation and divorce
- an unfaithful marriage partner
- an abusive marriage partner
- a loved one with an alcohol or drug problem
- dear ones with physical or mental disabilities
- children who cause much heartache and pain
- financial stress
- loss of a job or position
- bankruptcy
- sin, temptation, and evil
- the once in a lifetime virus that threatens life and shuts everything down.

These, and more, are the dangers and difficulties we face as we may make our way through life. So with the Psalmist we ask, I lift up my eyes to the hills (to the dangers and difficulties along life's journey) -- where does my help come from? It truly was lifting your eyes - the temple Mount is at 2,400 feet above sea level, only 30 miles from the coast. It was UP. You were walking UP. UP. Up. Up.

What's nice is that the Psalm answers its own question. Our help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. Imagine the might and the power to make everything in heaven and earth; imagine the might and the power to make you and me. The LORD, He is Almighty. All things are in His hands. Nothing and no one is stronger than Him. To such a God – a mighty God – we can look for help. We know He is more than able to do anything at anytime and anywhere. A little girl listened attentively as her father read the family devotions. She seemed awed by her parents' talk of God's limitless power and mercy. "Daddy," she asked, placing her little hands on his knees, "how big is God." Her father thought for a moment and answered, "Honey, he is always just a little bigger than you need." Our God, He is the Maker of heaven and earth. He is always able to give us exactly the help that we need.

In verses 3-8 the Psalmist lists the different ways in which the Lord is the pilgrim's help as he makes his pilgrimage over the mountains to Jerusalem. The psalmist sees God as helping the pilgrim every single step of the way.

In verse 3 the Psalmist says, "He will not let your foot slip ..." Sometimes the mountain trail took the pilgrim to narrow ledges on the side of a cliff. A single slip could mean a fall of hundreds of feet. But God keeps the pilgrim's feet upon the safety of the path. We have some of those trails here in Oregon, don't we?

What about night time? When it is dark outside, especially in the mountains, the pilgrim faces danger from wild animals and thieves. Even then the Lord protects: (Ps 121:3-4) ... he who watches over you will not slumber; (4) indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

Even the sun could create hardships for the pilgrim on his journey. Heat, thirst, sunstroke, and sunburn could all prevent the pilgrim from completing his journey. The pilgrim, however, does not have to fear: (Ps 121:5-6) The LORD watches over you-- the LORD is your shade at your right hand; (6) the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

God keeps His people safe on their pilgrim journey. He sees them through the problems and trials of life: (Ps 121:7) The LORD will keep you from all harm-- he will watch over your life ...

This does not mean God keeps all dangers from us. Nor does it mean that no true Christian ever suffers in this life. The desert and mountains do not disappear. They are still there and still need to be crossed. The thought of verse 7 is that evil cannot come near us to harm us permanently.

The Psalmist concludes the psalm with the encouraging words of verse 8: (Ps 121:8) the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

The Lord protects the pilgrim throughout the journey. Always and forever the pilgrim has the Lord with him. Always and forever the pilgrim can say, "My help comes from the Lord."

As we travel through this life, whether by planes, trains, or automobiles, hoping on a freight car, or just walking to the local market, just know that you never walk alone. And the people of God said, Amen.