

A Reassuring Melody

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Psalm 121

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“I lift my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.” “I lift my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.” “I lift my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.”

On Monday morning I repeated this phrase over and over again in my head as I looked past the hands in my face and the bright light shining in my eyes. The words calmed me, along with the music playing in the background. I lay still, reclined in the big chair, and I prayed as I breathed in and out, trying to be patient as the procedure continued.

Oral surgery. Not a fun experience, and one that was more uncomfortable and painful than I had expected. While not a life threatening event, during the surgery I leaned on my faith and the Holy Spirit’s presence as one dependent, for there was nothing I could do to make my situation better. I simply had to lie there and endure. My faith grounded me in those 90 minutes. It kept me from getting lost in the uncomfortable present. Instead, I found peace in knowing that A: I was not alone in this time; and B: it would not last forever.

God is always with us, although it is easy to forget about God until we are in a place of need. When we do find ourselves in distress, we call on the Scripture we know by heart to give us strength.

For many, it is verses of Psalm 121 that come to mind. The second of fifteen Psalms in a section called “Songs of Ascent,” this psalm was written for those on a journey, ascending to the holy city of Jerusalem. The pronoun usages lead scholars to believe that it was chanted by pilgrims responsively.

To continue Michael’s theme of illustrations from musicals, let’s return to “The Sound of Music.” This morning we focus on when the von Trapp family is fleeing Austria. German soldiers are chasing them, and the family hides in the convent where Maria once lived when she was a nun. When the soldiers enter the convent, the von Trapps are forced to leave, sneaking out the back exit.

They run from the convent, quickly and quietly, only to suddenly stop at what appears to be a dead end. Now what can they do? At this moment Maria cries, “I lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help!” — a reassuring melody in chaos. Moments later, the family finds another way to go and crosses the border to safety in the Swiss Alps.

A dramatic proclamation in a time of distress; not merely a pilgrimage. Musical writers Crouse and Lindsay do what so many of us do, especially to the Psalms. They take the Scripture out of

its original context. Offering the voice of people's experience of God and faith rather than the voice of God addressing us. Regardless of context, the Book of Psalms is able to connect with our human lives in a deep and powerful ways.

As Walter Brueggemann reflected in his thin but powerful volume: *Praying the Psalms — Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*: “The Psalter speaks about life the way it really is....it is a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity.” (2)

For the Israelites then, and for us now, it is easy to lose sight of the One who is our creator, our sustainer, our Lord and our life companion. Then and now and tomorrow, the question for us remains: From where will our help come? Our help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth. The nature of God is further revealed throughout the couplets: God is maker of heaven and earth....majestic helper, faithful keeper and preserver.

“He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.” God is the firm ground on which we stand, even when literally or figuratively our foot may slip. God's hold on us is constant, throughout the falls we may endure. And God is with us always. God never sleeps. This is in contrast to the other gods worshipped by Israel's neighbors in Mesopotamia that *did* sleep (or even died!) during the winter months, like the sun god Ra and the moon god Nanna. The gods were then revived in the seasons of growth and harvest.

In this Psalm, Israel rejects this, exclaiming that Yahweh *never* slumbers, *never* stops keeping watch over Israel. I imagine that, in those long dark winter nights, this Psalm was a particularly reassuring melody.

What comfort it must have given as it was sung, a tradition done at the beginning of the journey, by traveling pilgrims, when they were ascending to Jerusalem, the Holy City. Though a traveling band of people, they remained a community of faith. Not only were they not alone, but they were kept by God. As verse five describes: “The Lord is your *keeper*; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.” We are reminded of our keeper again in verse seven: “The Lord will *keep* you from all evil;” and verse eight: “The Lord will *keep* your going out and your coming in from this time on forevermore.” In a mere eight verses, the Psalmist uses some form of the word keep six times. It's a small word that, to this psalmist, means the world.

The Hebrew word for keep, *shamar*, has an interesting background. It shares its root with a very different word, thorn. Thorny bushes were used by shepherds when they had to create a makeshift corral for their sheep to keep them safe when they were far from home. The thorns enabled the shepherd to ensure that evil stayed out and that his sheep were kept safe. God (though not usually with thorny bushes) keeps our goodness in and keeps the evil out.

We all *have* lots of things, among them clothes. We have pants and we have shirts. We wash them for our own sake so that we can wear them again. Many of us also *keep* pets. Dogs, cats, or fish, these are beloved pets that are dear to us; they are much more than mere possessions, like the clothes.

We watch over them not for our own sake but for theirs, and we protect them from harm because, if they suffer, we do too. In some instances we wish we could take their pain from them, preferring ourselves to be hurt rather than to watch them endure pain. To be one's keeper makes one vulnerable, for it is not only their own hurt they have to protect against, but also another's. It is a big responsibility, a big responsibility that God takes on willingly.

This Psalm celebrates and affirms that we are kept by God. However, unlike our pets, we have a choice to make. As thinking, feeling and competent human beings, we are able to live quite well independently. And we like that. Stanford anthropology professor T.M. Luhmann wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed: "Americans like to think of ourselves as unique, autonomous, self-motivated, self-made..." (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/opinion/why-are-some-cultures-more-individualistic-than-others.html>). We like to be the lone ranger, so to speak, and we don't *need* or *want* a keeper.

To give one's self over to another is seen as a weakness. Strength is found in self-reliance, not dependence. This psalm challenges us to meet God, our keeper, on a two-way street, giving ourselves to God and allowing God to be our keeper, our protector, our all. To some, this may seem like an encroachment on our lives and something that is not at all appealing, but it is the foundation of our faith.

As Episcopal Priest Robert W. Fisher reflects: "It is as hard to accept that the Lord is my keeper as it is to accept that the Lord loves me, but these two facts are intertwined. That is the key to understanding not merely what the Lord does for us, but why. God's love is the very foundation of God's trustworthiness. God loves us, and therefore God keeps us." (2010 60)

The Psalm ends with lovely yet somewhat unbelievable statements that may initially make it hard for some to walk down that two-way street to allow being kept by God: "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."

If you are like me, these passages conjure up about half a dozen "Stump the Pastor" questions. We will have a chance to answer such questions next month but here are a few thoughts on these last verses. To understand how we can get hurt if God is keeping us, we need to remember that God gave us free will and hence our lives are a shared responsibility between us and God. We make mistakes; other people make mistakes. We get hurt; God suffers with us. Many a time I have remarked that this world would be better off, in some ways, if God had just programmed us to do the right things, to love one another always, rather than hurt and kill. But then we wouldn't be human, made in the image of God.

Co-Pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Reverend Beth Neel, vividly describes how she imagines God protecting us from all harmful and evil things: "I see this superhero type of person zipping around the globe at a speed faster than light, putting out fires and stopping bullets and holding together tectonic plates and blasting tumors out of bodies and stopping mosquitos from biting. But, as Rev. Neel reflects, God chooses not to do that, and so bullets pierce and shred us, and earthquakes and tsunamis destroy, and cancer invades and malaria

reigns. So much for being kept. So much for being protected. (Neel, <http://westprespdx.org/sermon/a-kept-people>)

Friends, as believers in the Resurrection, we know that not even death is the end with God; God keeps us in life and in death, and in all the pain in between — the broken relationship; the cancer diagnosis; the tragedy of a world filled with hate, violence and fear; unemployment; the death of a loved one. In all the tumult, in all the stormy times, the reassuring melody is heard above the noise: “I lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.” Always. God will never leave you. Even if you may lose your grip on God, God’s grip is sure, no matter what. There is no better keeper than God.

The Lord WILL keep you from all evil; God will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. A reassuring melody indeed. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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