

Psalm 121  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Second Sunday of Lent, Year A  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
March 5, 2023

## **Help from the Creator**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

The sermon today will be based largely on a psalm which formed part of a collection of psalms put together for use by pilgrims as they journeyed to the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate the various festivals. It is the second in a sequence of Song of Ascents, and as such could have been sung by those pilgrims as they “ascended,” that is, went up to Jerusalem, which sits on a hill. Two voices can be heard: an individual singer who affirms trust in the Lord, and a respondent who assures the singer that the Lord will indeed guard and keep. For the writer, going to worship in the Lord’s house was a joy. Hopefully, we know that same joy as we come to worship at Midway. Listen to Psalm 121 . . .

### *Introduction to the Epistle Lesson*

In our Epistle Lesson today we hear Paul say that it is the same God who called Abraham and Sarah to leave home in Genesis 12, who “gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist.” Listen to these words from Romans 4:1-5, 13-17...

### *Sermon*

Mountains and hills play a significant role in scripture. Noah’s ark floated for ten months, alighting atop the Armenian mountains of Ararat. It was on Mount Sinai that Moses received the Ten Commandments. On Mount Carmel Elijah had his trial against the priests of Baal. Jesus was transfigured on a mountain. And Jesus went to the Mount of Olives on the night of his betrayal.

People who have grown up or lived a good part of their lives around mountains can feel a special affinity for our psalm today. I have enjoyed hiking and fishing at Paris Mountain State Park, just a few miles from where we live in Greenville. Those of us who have spent time at Montreat, above Black Mountain, on the edge of the Blue Ridge Parkway, know it to be a special place where it seems easy to draw near to the heart of God.

Our earthly pilgrimage began in our mother's womb, and it will end one day when we breathe our last breath. And most of us are closer to the latter than the former. But in between there are a number of smaller journeys. Learning to walk and talk. Going to school. Competing in sports. Going to work. Perhaps getting married and having children. Changing jobs. Moving to a new location. Experiencing an empty nest. Retiring. Volunteering. Grieving the loss of a loved one.

This Sunday marks the second Sunday in our journey of Lent. It began with Ash Wednesday, and it will end with The Last Supper in an upper room before Judas goes out to betray Jesus. Then there's the darkness of Jesus' crucifixion on the cross, before the light dawns on Easter morning.

For those on a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem, the surrounding hills were inescapable. They would have to travel through the potentially dangerous Judean hill country. These pilgrims might look up to the hills and wonder where help could be found.

I read a story about a U.S. marine who was separated from his unit on a Pacific island during World War II. The fighting had been intense, and in the smoke and the crossfire he had lost touch with his comrades. Alone in the jungle, he could hear enemy soldiers coming in his direction. Scrambling for cover, he found his way up a high ridge to several small caves. Quickly he crawled inside one of the caves. Although safe for the moment, he realized that once

the enemy soldiers looking for him swept up the ridge, they would quickly search all the caves and he would be killed. As he waited, he prayed, "Lord, if it be your will, please protect me. Whatever your will though, I love you and trust you. Amen."

After praying, he lay quietly listening to the enemy drawing closer. He thought, "Well, I guess the Lord isn't going to help me out of this one." Then he saw a spider begin to build a web over the front of his cave. As he watched, listening to those searching for him all the while, the spider layered strand after strand of web across the opening of the cave. "Hah, he thought, "What I need is a brick wall and what the Lord has sent me is a spider web. God does have a sense of humor."

Well, as the enemy drew closer, he watched from the darkness of his hideout and could see them searching one cave after another. As they came to his, he got ready to make his last stand. To his amazement however, after glancing in the direction of his cave, they passed on. Suddenly, he realized that with the spider web over the entrance, his cave looked as if no one had entered for quite a while. "Lord, forgive me," prayed the young man. "I had forgotten that in you a spider's web is stronger than a brick wall." Yes, sometimes we fail to recognize the help that God provides.

The psalmist declares the source of his help:

My help comes from the Lord  
who made heaven and earth. (v. 2)

This declaration of trust contains a confessional formula that is echoed in the opening affirmation of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth.

Thus do the psalmist and the creed point us to the One whose power to help is beyond our imaginations. Our help is not in the hills. It's in the One who created the hills. It is the Lord who can give us the courage to undertake our journeys, as did Abraham and Sarah. It is the Lord who can create life in a lifeless womb and bring into being Isaac, the son of promise. The Creator is able to bring new life to the dead. To make possible that which we cannot imagine. He enables us to run the race set before us, to fight the good fight, to keep the faith.

In the Heidelberg Catechism, which is in our *Book of Confessions*, Question 28, asks this:

How does the knowledge of God's creation and providence help us?

And the answer is this:

We can be patient when things go against us,  
 thankful when things go well,  
 and for the future we can have  
 good confidence in our faithful God and Father  
 that nothing in creation will separate us from his love.

Then verses 3-8 of our psalm declare God to be our keeper, ever-watchful—day and night. Six times in the eight verses of this short psalm, we find the word *keep*. Not only did God make heaven and earth, but he watches over us, guards and preserves us. And we never outgrow our need for God's keeping.

Episcopal Priest Robert Fisher says that there is a big difference between having and keeping. We might *have* a favorite jacket. It is our own possession. Whereas, we might *keep* our dog or cat, not merely a possession, but a beloved pet. Therefore, we watch over the dog or cat, not just for our sake, but for theirs as well. We provide food and clean water. If it's too cold outside, we bring them inside. If they get sick, we take them to the vet.

Likewise does God keep us. We are God's beloved creatures. For us God sent his only Son to live and die, that we might be saved. We are not mere possessions of God; if we hurt,

God notices. In the New Testament we hear of God's Son being like a Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep entrusted to him. No one will snatch them out of his hand (Jn. 10:25). He will be the shepherd and guardian of all who entrust themselves to him.

For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. (1 Peter:2:25)

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:7)

In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and goes out into the wilderness searching for the one lost sheep, searching until he finds it. And when he finds it, he lays it on his shoulders and brings it home.

The Lord is our keeper—because he loves us. The Keeper of Israel is the help of each pilgrim in the journeys of life. Where can we find help when a loved one has died? Where can we find help when we finally acknowledge an addiction? Where can we find help when the doctor says, “There is nothing more we can do”? Where can we find help as we plan for our church's future?

My help comes from the Lord  
who made heaven and earth. (v. 2)

The Lord is your keeper,  
the Lord is your shade at your right hand. (v. 5)

Miriam Dunson has written a little book called, *A Very Present Help*. It's a study of the psalms for older adults. It's in our church library, and you can check it out. Therein she tells a story about how important shade can be for someone exposed to the tropical sun. Dunson recalls being in Africa some years ago to attend the dedication ceremonies of the Good Shepherd Hospital at Kananga. The dedication was outside in the sun and lasted for hours. And those

sitting in the audience had no shade of any kind. Well, after about two hours of sitting in the blazing sun, Miriam Dunson passed out and had to be revived and cooled off.

For her, “The Lord is your shade,” is then a metaphor of God’s guarding us from anything that saps our life away or keeps us from being all that we are capable of being.

The 121<sup>st</sup> Psalm is one we often hear read at a funeral service.. For it provides assurance at the end of the journey of life. For God’s keeping extends beyond the realm of the knowable. Beyond this earthly life to a home prepared for us in heaven.

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. (vv. 7-8)

Paul says that God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist.

Psalm 121 is used liturgically in the Lutheran tradition in both the service of baptism and funerals. The psalm is a comfort not only at death, but in all the journeys of our lives. In the face of evil. In the face of death. In our comings and goings. From this time forth and forevermore. No, we are not freed from all tears, pain, and suffering, all the hurts and heartaches of life, or free from bearing a cross. But the Lord who made heaven and earth will always be our keeper—a very present help in trouble.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.