

Matthew 6:25-34

Psalm 121

August 17, 2014

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A Summer in the Psalms
A PSALM FOR SOJOURNERS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Our niece, Georgia (my sister's oldest daughter), was once a nun. Considering Georgia was baptized and raised in the Presbyterian Church, that's something of a surprise. Even more surprising is that Georgia is married and has two daughters of her own!

Georgia was cast as "Nun #1" in the NBC-TV live production of "The Sound of Music" which aired on December 5 of last year. Carrie Underwood starred as Maria von Trapp. We had fun looking for Georgia in her nun's habit (she also switched roles and danced on the von Trapps' patio in one scene). That may be the first time I had watched "The Sound of Music" since the iconic movie was released in 1965.

Near the end of the story, the singing von Trapp family performs at the Salzburg Festival. Their encore song is "So Long, Farewell." As each member of the family exits singing "Auf wiedersehen, goodbye," he or she quickly leaves the stage in an attempt to escape the Nazis. When Max announces that the von Trapps have won first place, "the highest honor in all Austria," the family doesn't come back on stage, even after two fanfares from the band. One of the Nazi guards rushes in and yells, "They're gone!"

The von Trapps flee to the convent where Maria had once been a nun-in-training. The Reverend Mother hides the family and the Nazis are unable to find them. Since the Austrian borders are closed, Captain von Trapp decides to use the convent's car to take his family toward the Austrian Alps. The Reverend Mother blesses the von Trapp family with these words: "I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help . . . God be with you."

Whether it's a family fleeing from danger by crossing the Alps or people of faith making their way to worship God in his Temple in Jerusalem or just the day-in and day-out navigating of the ups-and-downs, life is often described as a journey. You don't need me to tell you that life's journey is often hard, full of mountains and valleys. You don't need me to tell you that our feet often slip off the path, or that we go through dry spells when we feel faint in the faith. Because we know that is true about this journey we call life, we might ask the same question as the psalmist: "Where will my help come from?" The answer is the same today as it was for God's people as they sang this song on the way to Jerusalem: "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

We talk about someone's entire life being "from the cradle to the grave." Here are some reflections on God keeping our coming in and our going out on life's journey.

It is a Jewish custom to have a copy of Psalm 121 in the delivery room when a baby is born. The verses are used as a prayer to God for an easy birth and delivery. Another reason for having Psalm 121 in the delivery room and the hospital room after delivery is to begin the child's Jewish education from the very beginning. Parents are encouraged to hang a copy of the psalm in the child's crib or on the door to the baby's room when they get to go home.

A number of years ago, on a **very** hot summer afternoon, people gathered at a graveside down the road at Rockfish cemetery. A beautiful, full, and large shade tree stood close to the grave. As people got out of their cars and walked to the graveside, most of them headed for the relative comfort of the shade tree. When everyone had arrived and before Greg Padgett gave me the signal to begin, he invited the people to move in closer. This meant getting out from under the shade tree and standing in the hot sun. I think a few people **might** have taken a few baby-steps forward.

By the graveside on that **very** hot summer afternoon, with the sun striking us by day, I read Psalm 121. For some reason, as I read verses 5 - 6, "The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night," I glanced over to my right and noticed the large crowd of people standing under that shade tree, trying to find some relief and shelter from the heat and sun. It was one of those moments when the spoken word came to life in a very vivid way. People were hot and were seeking safety from the sun and comfort from the heat. They found some respite in the shade of a tree. People had gathered for worship, to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On that **very** hot summer afternoon, at the end of our friend's sojourn through this life, we confronted the reality of death and had something to affirm. We found some respite and comfort and assurance.

When parents bring their baby for the sacrament of baptism, we especially think about life's sojourn ahead for that little boy and girl and the parents. Our new Presbyterian hymnbook, *Glory to God*, has nineteen hymns in the section about Baptism. One beautiful hymn is called "I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry." The note at the bottom of the page in the hymnbook says, "Originally created to accompany a video series on baptism, this hymn speaks in the imagined conversational voice of God, assuring the person being baptized of God's presence throughout the changing stages of life. It offers a reminder that baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event."

As you listen, think about Psalm 121:8: "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."

*"I was there to hear your borning cry;
I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized
to see your life unfold.
I was there when you were but a child*

*with a faith to suit you well;
in a blaze of light you wandered off
to find where demons dwell.”*

*“When you heard the wonder of the Word,
I was there to cheer you on.
You were raised to praise the living Lord
to whom you now belong.
If you find someone to share your time
and you join your hearts as one,
I’ll be there to make your verses rhyme
from dusk till rising sun.”*

*“In the middle ages of your life,
not too old, no longer young,
I’ll be there to guide you through the night,
complete what I’ve begun.
When the evening gently closes in
and you shut your weary eyes,
I’ll be there as I have always been
with just one more surprise.”*

*“I was there to hear your borning cry;
I’ll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized
to see your life unfold.”*

We read the psalms with Christian eyes and hear them with Christian ears. But the psalms come to us in the church from the worship life of God’s people of Israel. Our Christian faith is grounded in the faith of ancient Israel, a faith that was bold enough to say, “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Almost every Sunday morning, as part of our response to God’s Word read and proclaimed in worship, we stand as a congregation and say what we believe with the words of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” When we say those words and confess our faith, we are saying and confessing what the church has said and confessed for centuries — and what God’s people have said since the days of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses — and what Psalm 121 declares: the God who made heaven and earth is the one Lord, who is our source of strength and help.

Yes, we read and hear the psalms as Christians. We know and feel and experience God’s love, God’s power, and God’s providential care — not in some abstract or vague way, but in Jesus Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection. For that reason,

Psalm 121 has played an important role in the church's life and worship through the years. Psalm 121 is never mentioned in the New Testament. Jesus Christ, obviously, is never mentioned by name in Psalm 121. Nevertheless, Psalm 121 is one of the more popular psalms in our Christian hymns and worship and faith. The psalmist's words are a testimony to God's providential care in our lives through Jesus Christ. To put it another way, the God who created everything there is loves us enough to be concerned about everything in our lives. That's where our help comes from.

This morning we are not using the Apostles' Creed as our Affirmation of Faith. Instead, I chose some questions from the Heidelberg Catechism in our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*. In the mid-1500's, Swiss Reformed Christians and German Lutherans couldn't agree on all matters concerning the faith, especially about the symbolism and meaning of the Lord's Supper. Frederick the Elector, who ruled a part of Germany that included the city of Heidelberg, was very concerned about this disunity. He commissioned two young men — Zacharias Ursinus, professor of theology, and Kaspar Olevianus, pastor to the city of Heidelberg — to write a catechism that would be agreeable to both sides. The men finished their work in 1562 and their catechism was published in January 1563. The 129 questions are divided into 52 sections, so the catechism can be taught in a year's worth of Lord's Days.

Look in your bulletin and find today's Affirmation of Faith. The Heidelberg Catechism is known and loved for its very personal nature and its use of biblical language. Look at the first question/answer: "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" "That I belong — body and soul, in life and in death — not to myself but to my faithful Savior." Now look at the next question/answer. We affirm that the God "who out of nothing created heaven and earth with all that is in them . . . is for the sake of Christ his Son my God and my Father."

The psalms in general, and Psalm 121 in particular, have something to teach us about being in community. The psalm's opening question — "Where will my help come from?" — sounds personal, and it is. The psalm assures us that God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, is concerned about each of us, and will help us and guide us and protect us on life's journey. But the psalm also reminds us that this God is not just our own personal God, but the God who created and sustains everything there is, who has called a people into being, who has redeemed us by his power and through his love in Jesus Christ. Our personal faith journey is part of our sojourn with the people of God — in worship, in praise, and in trust. The faith of the community, the church, supports us in our personal life journey — especially when our foot slips or we think God has fallen asleep at the wheel or the sun is striking us down on a **very** hot summer afternoon by a friend's grave.

As one person has said, "[This psalm] has long been a psalm suited for travelers about to set out on a journey, whether they bend down to tighten a sandal strap or reach over to fasten a seatbelt. But it is also a psalm for sojourners, with a scope wide enough to embrace the whole of life's way, from baptism until burial and beyond."¹

When we listen for God's Word to us, it's good to hear the Word in different voices or translations. Many times I share newer translations of a scripture passage in my sermons to help us appreciate what God's Word has to say to us. Today I'll close with an older translation of Psalm 121. Maybe you learned this by heart. If so, you can join in if you want to. If you didn't learn it by heart, hear these "old" words with "new" ears. In any case, listen for God's Word:

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,
from whence cometh my help.
My help cometh from the Lord,
which made heaven and earth.
He will not suffer thy foot to be moved:
he that keepeth thee will not slumber.
Behold, he that keepeth Israel
shall neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is thy keeper:
the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.
The sun shall not smite thee by day,
nor the moon by night.
The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil:
he shall preserve thy soul.
The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in
from this time forth, and even for evermore.*

Let us pray: God our helper, you are strength greater than the mountains. You look to our needs and watch over us day and night. Teach us to hold confidently to your grace so that in times of fear and danger we may know you are near and depend on you, our sure deliverer. Amen.

NOTES

¹James Limburg, "Psalm 121: A Psalm for Sojourners," *Word & World* 5/2 (1985) at www-wordandworld.luthersem.edu.