

The Pilgrim Way: Pause, Provision, and Protection

Luke 11:5-13 Psalm 121

Our series for Lent is “The Pilgrim Way”—looking at what it means to have the heart of a pilgrim, and looking at our life as a journey of faith. Especially as we follow Jesus to Jerusalem this Lenten season. And an important part of a pilgrimage, as with any journey, especially a journey on foot, is taking time for pause—pause for rest, and for perspective. That is our theme today.

We are reading from the gospel of Luke each Sunday during Lent, and our text this morning is Luke 11:5-13. Jesus and his followers are on their way to Jerusalem, and along the way Jesus takes a pause—a pause for personal prayer, which his disciples observe him doing, and afterward they ask him to teach them to pray. Jesus gives them the Lord’s prayer, and then follows up with this:

Luke 11:5-13

5 And he said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.” ⁷And he answers from within, “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.” ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

9 ‘So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks,

the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’

Our next reading is from the book of Psalms. The book of Psalms is basically a song book, or, more accurately, a collection of song books. Psalms have been sung or chanted in corporate worship by the Hebrew people in synagogue over the centuries. Still are. And often used for personal prayer and worship.

This morning’s psalm, 121, is part of a group of psalms, a specific song book within a song book, called the Songs of Ascents—these are Psalms 120 through 134. In fact, in your Bible it may notate that at the top of each of those particular psalms, as mine does: it says, “A song of ascents.”

These 15 psalms were likely sung, possibly in sequence, by Hebrew pilgrims as they went up to Jerusalem to the great worship festivals. Jerusalem was the highest city, geographically, in Palestine, and so all who travelled there spend much of their time ascending. But the ascent was not only literal, it was also a metaphor: the journey to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, a pilgrimage that advanced from one level to another in developing maturity. In

the New Testament, this is what the apostle Paul, a good Hebrew, described as “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil.3:14)—he just took this concept of ascent and applied it to our Christian journey.

Three times a year faithful Hebrews made that trip (Exodus 23:14-17 and 34:22-24 set the journeys in motion).

The Hebrews were a people:

(1) whose salvation had been accomplished at the exodus, to be remembered and celebrated in the feast of Passover in the spring; they were a people:

(2) whose identity had been defined at Sinai, with the covenant—in the 10 commandments and giving of the law, so they renewed their commitments as God’s covenanted people at the Feast of Pentecost in early summer; and the Hebrews were a people:

(3) whose preservation had been assured in the forty years of wilderness wandering. So they responded as a blest community to the goodness that God provided for them, at the feast of Tabernacles in autumn.

So, they tri-annually climbed the road to Jerusalem. And so, both along the road and while in the city, they refreshed their memory that they were a

redeemed people, a covenanted and commanded people, a blessed people.

That's a cool way to look at our pilgrimage of faith too, if we think about it.

The picture of the Hebrews singing these 15 psalms as they left their routines and made their way from towns and villages, farms and cities, as pilgrims up to Jerusalem, has become embedded in the *Christian* imagination, in our personal spiritual lives and our discipleship and devotion to Jesus Christ, as well as our corporate worship.

We know that our Lord, from a very early age, went up to Jerusalem for the annual feasts (recorded for us in Luke 2:41-42). And we continue to identify with the first disciples who, to quote from Mark 10:32, "were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid." We, also, are sometimes amazed and afraid, for there is wonder upon unexpected wonder on this road with Jesus; *and*, there are fearful specters to be met, and uncertain events (as we talked about last week).

Saying or singing the 15 psalms is a way both to express the amazing grace, and to quiet the anxious fears. And this morning's psalm is an excellent example and expression for us of this.

Psalm 121

A Song of Ascents.

I lift up my eyes to the hills—

from where will my help come?

My help comes from the LORD,

who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved;

he who keeps you will not slumber.

He who keeps Israel

will neither slumber nor sleep.

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.

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 for evermore.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

A way long time ago I spent three and half months in Scotland, with a team of others from Seattle, doing some mission work. The first half of the time was spent in the highlands, in an area called Aviemore, with an evangelist, helping him with his ministry. The second half was spent in an old former mining town called Newmains, about 20 miles east of Glasgow. While there we came alongside an old Scottish Presbyterian parish minister who had charge of 3 churches; and we helped with worship, making visits, doing youth and children's ministry, and, drinking a lot of tea!

Of the many things we learned on this trip, we learned that in Scotland, this Psalm—121—is known as “the travelers psalm.” When someone was about to embark on a journey, a group of people—family and friends, fellow church members—would read this to the one about to embark, and offer prayer that God would watch over their going and coming. We were blessed by this, and maybe you’d like to try this, when you have family and friends leaving to travel!

As mentioned, this psalm is part of the Psalms of Ascents that were sung or recited by travelers on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the high festivals each year. As they journeyed from hither and yon toward Jerusalem they would typically walk through valleys, and as they travelled through valleys and gulleys they would naturally pause, and lift their eyes up from time to time to look at the skyline and gain some perspective. It’s just natural to lift your eyes and look for the horizon and see and enjoy a more panoramic view of where you are.

Around western Washington, when we lift our eyes while walking around, we see buildings, and more buildings! And tall trees, and, on a clear day, off in the distance, spectacular mountains. When these travelers would lift their eyes on the way to Jerusalem, though, what they would see at the top of the nearby

hills were large statues, or shrines, or temples to the pagan gods of the place they were passing through.

So the psalmist says, “I lift my eyes to the hills; from where will my help come?” Not from *these*, but from the one true God, the Creator—the great and loving God who made heaven and earth, who is bigger than all these other things. Our help does not come from human-made things, but from God, who, because he made everything, therefore helps and protects us.

As travelers journeyed there were the usual dangers: stumbling over rocks, heat stroke during the heat of the day, moon stroke (or “lunacy”) at night; getting disoriented or lost; there were thieves and bandits. And even sometimes along the journey there was the occasional unexpected death.

Any time anyone travels or has adventures—or even if we’re *not* travelling or having outbound adventures; maybe we’re just trying to navigate the parking lot at Costco—at any time, travelling or not, there are dangers and risks. That’s life. So we need to pause, take time out, to focus on the affirmations and the promises of God. And the affirmation here in Psalm 121 is that God watches over us, wherever we are. God never sleeps. God is always awake. God is always keeping an eye on us. It’s just in God’s nature. God doesn’t need a triple latte to

stay awake and pay attention to us. God keeps vigil over us because that just who God is. That's one promise here. Let that promise encourage you.

The other key promise in this passage is that God will keep you from all evil. That seems like an extravagant promise. And on the surface it seems like a promise that God doesn't always keep because terrible and unpleasant things do happen. Even to good people. People die untimely deaths. Children grow up in bad homes. Addiction gets a hold on someone's life and causes damage. Natural disasters wreak havoc on innocent people. Coronavirus creates a pandemic and causes illness and economic turbulence and uncertainty. So how can the psalmist say that God will keep you from all evil?

Here's what it means: the promise is not that we shall never have illness, or accident, or distress, or even death. The promise is not that if you're a good person nothing bad will ever happen to you. Wouldn't it be nice if God promised that we would never experience pain, for example, especially if we're good and if we have enough faith? But we aren't promised that.

The promise is that none of these things that *could* happen will have *power over us*, to be able to separate us from God's love (as it says in Romans 8—nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord).

The promise is for God's protection over our *hearts, minds and souls* when we ask God to help us and when we look to God, lifting up our eyes so to speak, to be that power which *does* help us.

As Jesus said, ask, and it *shall* be given you; seek, and you *shall* find; knock, and the door *shall* be opened; your Father gives good gifts, especially the Holy Spirit—our comforter, teacher, and guide. We need to pause, then, and be reminded of God's always-alert care and protection over heart and mind and soul, and God's provision of help, especially inward help of protecting and strengthening heart and soul.

The promise is not that bad things won't happen. The promise is that we are preserved from the evil of those things *getting inside of us*.

All of the water in the entire world cannot sink a boat unless it gets inside of it. Neither can all the trouble of the world harm us unless it gets inside of us. *That's* why the Psalmist says, "The Lord will keep you from all evil."

Six times in this psalm it says that God is your *keeper*. In this is a sense of guardianship: God faithfully and tirelessly standing guard at the door of your heart. The apostle Paul uses this same language and imagery in Phil.4:7, where he says that the peace of God, which passes understanding, will guard your hearts

and minds in Christ Jesus, when we pray and ask God for help. The word 'keeper' in the Psalm isn't about ownership, but guardianship. God will guard your heart and mind, so that things like fear, bitterness, despair, and so forth, won't settle in.

The only serious mistake we can make when trouble comes, is to conclude that God has taken his eye off of us and has shifted his attention (his keeping) elsewhere. Or, we think he is sleeping on the job. He's dozed off while on duty.

No, God is our keeper, watching over our lives. He never sleeps. He always guards and watches.

Even over that final journey, that ultimate pilgrimage from this life to the next. God watches over that too. It's affirmed in Psalm 23: even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. So even in death God is there, watching and keeping, guarding our heart from fear.

God watches over our lives. He is our keeper. The invitation for us is to lift our eyes up from time to time, to know and receive God's help and keeping. God is so very, very big. I think we forget that sometimes. God is our creator, and he has come near to us in the person of Jesus Christ, and shown us what his love looks like, tangibly. So in a way, we lift up our eyes and see the cross of Jesus,

from which our help comes. This Lenten season, that is where our pilgrim journey is leading: to the cross of Christ. And, yes, eventually to the empty tomb and resurrection! But for now, our ascent is to the hill where Jesus was crucified.

In this season of sheltering in place, and adjusting our lives to this new reality we are in for a time, what would it look like for you to pause, and lift up your eyes? Whether you are out walking, or watching something on television, or reading, or shopping at the grocery store, can you and I stop what we're doing, pause, and look up—maybe literally, but also in our minds—and get perspective. Where does our help really come from? Do we trust that God is watching over us all day long? And at the end of the day, can you go to bed at night and sleep, in the assurance that God *isn't* going to go to sleep? That God is keeping watch over you, and your loved ones, and the rest of the world?

Gracious God, always awake, always alert, always watching over us: grant us your peace; and grant us large perspective as we look to you for the help we need at this time. While we aren't as active in our usual ways, we know that you are active, in blessing and renewing the world, and that you have new things to teach us through this experience of waiting and trusting. Through Christ, the prince of peace, amen.