

“Our Helper and Our Keeper”

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**Sunday, March 12, 2017
Second Sunday in Lent**

Readings from Scripture: John 3:1-17 and Psalm 121

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘you must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

John 3: 1-17

*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 forevermore.*

Psalm 121

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us have within, the words that we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from the Gospel and the Psalter and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning. I ask that you touch, bless and transform all of them into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ. May it be a word that we can hear, a word that encourages and comforts us, a word that is your truth now and forever. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

I don't know if you are all up on the latest news. You may have heard that Arnold Schwarzenegger has decided to not carry on as the host of The Apprentice. Did you all know that? Okay. And Mark Burnett, the producer, was going to have Trump come back, but apparently he is a little busy. So instead Mr. Burnett has decided to create a brand new television show—kind of like a game show—and it's called, “America's Greatest Pastor”. Guess who one of the teams is going to be? Karen and I. We've been practicing. One of the challenges is a speed challenge and it's the Lord's Prayer. Ready. You can say it with me. Go: Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever Amen. Now you know why we use the word “debts” rather than “trespasses”. Too long. Another one of the skits is called “Avoid the MOB” and it's not about the crowd of people, it's about the mother of the bride. There are pews you have to hurdle, and bridesmaids you have to run around and no matter what, avoid the mother of the bride.

One of the things that didn't make it, though, because let's face it, it's not quite zingy enough, would be the Outline Memorial Service Challenge. No one wants to hear that, but if there was a challenge like that, I can tell you that the first thing would be a Call to Worship and the content of that Call to Worship would be Psalm 121. It's almost automatic. *I lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?* And then the response, *My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.* It's one of those things that no matter where we are or what we are doing, we read this and it's like, “Oh, I've heard that at a memorial service.” It's a very comforting passage.

What I want to do is try to open it up a little bit and have it be for more than just those times when we gather here to celebrate someone's life. I want to invite us to remember that the Psalter is the prayer book of the people of Israel. These prayers have been offered through the millennia as witnesses to God's presence, God's promise and God's power in the life of the people of faith. And so if we think about this prayer as something that's offered from the community, one of the things is how it's written. *I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord.*

He will not let your foot be moved. He will not let you slumber. He keeps Israel. He will neither slumber or sleep. He's your keeper. He's keeping you from evil. He'll keep your life. He's going to keep your going out and your coming in. Keeping, keeping, keeping, keeping, keeping. When you are crushed, you want to know that you have been kept. When you are not sure, you want to know that God is paying attention.

But because I'm a little bit off sometimes where I go with things, the image that came to me as I kept hearing about keeper, keeper, keeper, keeper, reminded me of being a little child and going to the zoo. On the path with a gate, then a moat, then a fence, and then maybe the lion, or maybe whatever it was that we were looking at. There was this distance between me as the one who wanted to see the lion, and what was happening in my life. There was the rail, the moat, the fence and then way back there in the corner, maybe, a little bit of orange. And I think, is this the image of God that we have? Especially when we read this Psalm. I lift my eyes to the hills with binoculars, in need, I'm struggling, I'm lost, I'm hungry, I'm hurting. Where are you...you...you? The sense is that we are alone in the valley and that God is far, far away.

As I've shared before, not too long ago I was at a conference in northeast New Mexico at the Presbyterian Camp called Ghost Ranch. While there, the presenter kept tweaking us to think about the things that we just simply take for granted, like reading a Psalm as it's given. What he did was he really pushed us to think about the image that we have of God and the name that we have of God. One of the sessions began with him asking, "How did we get from the burning bush that says to Moses, 'I will be whatever I will be,' as the name of God, to the Great Lord Jehovah, the old, bearded, finger-wagging man?" How do we get that image of a God who is far away and distant and pointing a finger, when a bush ignites but is not consumed and calls out "Moses" and draws him in? Moses woke up to something that day. Moses woke up to the reality that God is not up in the hills far away, but that God is right here, right now, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

It's not just Moses who is advocating for this wake up call or God through the bush with Moses, but listen to what Jesus said in the Gospel that Karen just read. "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. And very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom without being born of water and spirit." What Jesus is telling the disciples and all of us who will listen is you have to wake up to something new, something that's not obvious, something that God is doing in the world that doesn't necessarily make sense to us.

And so I want to offer a reading of Psalm 121 in different voice. Not that the keeper voice is bad, but just to offer a different way to think about it and a different way to look at it, that honors the language in which it was written. Another thing that the presenter kept getting us to wrap our heads around was that for each word in the Hebrew language, there are three, four, five or six English words that capture the essence of what is trying to be shared. So imagine Psalm 121 not being offered from the pit of despair but maybe at the break of day, as the sun is coming up over the mountains.

I lift my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come? My help comes from I-Am-Who-I-Am, the Creator who makes heaven and earth. Our Creating God will not let our foot be moved. The Light of all Life, the Essence that burned in the bush is going to guard us and will not be extinguished. Behold, the Guardian of Israel will never fall asleep, but will always be faithful. The Loving Presence is watching over you. The Loving Presence is the shadow at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon at night. I-Am-Who-I-Am will watch over you, shepherd you and keep you from all evil and depravity and everything that causes harm. The one who whispers will guard your soul and protect your life and will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

The invitation of the Gospel is for all of us to wake up, to see things differently and to understand that the structures that we have put in place cannot and will not contain the grace and presence of God. And sometimes these structures that we have in place are the words that we use, faithful words like “keeper” or “Lord”. All I want to invite you to consider is as you read the Psalms, especially in this season of Lent, to play with them and to open them up and to think, how might I write this Psalm? Because as we know, music sounds different when it's set with a different orchestra or different instruments. There is beauty that comes from setting something in a different way, and my fear is, too often, we lose the beauty of these prayers because we are stuck in the old habits and patterns. So brothers and sisters, in this season of Lent, as you commit yourselves to prayer and the reading of scripture, be free. Amen.