

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **A Psalm for Travelers**

Psalm 121  
Transfiguration of Our Lord, Year A

I began last Sunday's sermon with some highlights and words from the life of Frederick Douglass. Today I want to start with Harriet Tubman, who was born into slavery on a Maryland plantation in 1822. As she grew up, Tubman endured harsh labor, frequent whippings, and the pain of seeing some of her siblings sold. But she persevered, through a deep and abiding faith in God that had been cultivated in part by her mother, who told her stories from the Bible.

One of the ways Tubman acted on her faith was by leading scores of slaves north to freedom through the Underground Railroad. As she reflected on the fact that she never lost a runaway slave, Tubman said, "I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger." Yet she was careful to give credit to God. "'Twant me, 'twas the Lord. I always told him, 'I trusts to you. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me,' and he always did."<sup>1</sup>

As she relied on God to guide and protect her, I'm not sure if Harriet Tubman was familiar with Psalm 121. But it certainly captures the kind of confidence she displayed in God's presence, providence, and promises. It's no wonder that so many have taken this portion of Scripture and committed it to memory. For people of faith who look for words of reassurance amid life's troubles, trials, and turmoil, Psalm 121 is a go-to text.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth" (vv. 1-2). This psalm begins with someone's question and confession of faith. The question: Where can I look for help? The confession of faith: My help comes from the Lord. You can begin to see how this pairing can be so portable and useful to people in all kinds of situations and circumstances.

In its original context, this combination of question and confession of faith probably came from the mouth of a traveler. Psalm 121 is part of a group of psalms that all bear the title, "A Song of Ascents." This ascription indicates that these psalms were probably used by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for a religious festival or celebration. Imagine a member of the faithful, about to depart on a journey to the holy city. He or she lifts their eyes and gazes toward hills in the distance, especially Mount Zion, the highest point in ancient Jerusalem. This is the place where God dwells and from which God rules. "I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from?"

When I was a young boy, a couple of my cousins joined me in an excursion that nearly scared our parents to death. Behind our family's house was a huge field that stretched all the way to the edge of the Yadkin River. Beyond the river lay some small hills, the first steps toward a string of mountains. On one of those small hills was a clearing, visible from a distance, though it was hard to make out all the details. That clearing, on that hill, would be our destination.

We set out with determination and imagination, but without telling our parents that we were leaving. Shortly into our journey, it became clear that if we were going to reach that hill, we would have to cross the river. So we began trying to find a spot where the river was fairly narrow and shallow. We kept going and going, and going and going, never actually finding a place that seemed safe enough to cross. Eventually, we found ourselves in a field behind an uncle's house, way beyond earshot of our mothers, who were in our backyard, shouting our names in panic. At that point, we gave up on our mission and began the long walk home.

I don't recall the details of what happened when we returned from our failed pilgrimage. I'm guessing it involved some sort of rebuke from our parents, who had been probably been calling out to the Maker of heaven and earth, fearful about what had become of their sons. Looking back on it, I can see that we were an adventurous but naive band of traveling tweens. Maybe someone in my little country church had read or recited Psalm 121 to me, and even though I couldn't recall it, it was still true. Thankfully the Lord was watching over our coming and going.

This is a psalm for travelers, no matter what piece of territory you're passing through in your journey of life. It's a psalm that promises God's presence. It reminds us that we're kept, not by our own vigilance but by God's. "He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will neither slumber nor sleep" (vv. 3-4).

Theologian and author Leonard Sweet tells about a tribe of Native Americans that had a unique way of training young braves. Sweet says:

On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Until then he had never been away from the security of his family and tribe. But on this night he was blindfolded and taken miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of thick woods. By himself. All night long.

Every time a twig snapped, he probably visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. Every time an animal howled, he imagined a wolf leaping out of the darkness. Every time the wind blew, he wondered what more sinister sound it masked. No doubt it was a terrifying night for many.

After what seemed like an eternity, the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. Looking around, the boy saw flowers, trees, and the outline of the path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was the boy's father. He had been there all night long.

Can you think of any better way for a child to learn how God allows us to face the tests of life? God is always present with us. God's presence is unseen, but it is more real than life itself.<sup>2</sup>

The protecting presence of God is more real than all the dangers that we face. Disease, injury, accident, natural disaster, job loss, financial distress, family turmoil, neglect, persecution, violence, sin, evil, and death itself. None of these can separate the faithful from the God who keeps, the God who watches over. This doesn't mean that the faithful will be shielded from all risks, dangers, and threats. God's promise isn't that life's journey will be peaceful and pain-free. God's promise is that at every step in the journey, his presence is more real and more lasting than all forms of suffering and sorrow.

So as you travel, as you sojourn day by day, you can be assured that you are the object of his loving care. Not just in a broad and general sense, but in a deeply personal way. Earlier this week, our day care center's three-year-old class asked me to come visit them. They had a song they wanted to sing for me. "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands."

Recall how this song moves from the cosmic to the personal. It transitions naturally from God's "got the whole world in his hands" to God's "got you and me, sister/brother, in his hands." Even the children's hand gestures reinforced the message that the sovereign ruler of the cosmos is devoted to his care for each of us.

God has revealed his watchful love for each of us through Jesus Christ, who embodies the life of trust in God's providence and protection. This didn't mean that Jesus was shielded from all harm. On the contrary, our Lord was fully exposed to life's evil and suffering, most of all in the cross. But even then, and perhaps most of all then, God was present, in saving power.

In a book of Christian statements of faith, Jaroslav Pelikan includes one from the Maasai people of East Africa. Their creed declares that Jesus "was always on safari doing good." It also declares that after Jesus had been "tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died, he lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from the grave. He ascended unto the skies. He is the Lord." When one of Pelikan's students shared this creed with him, he commented: "And so she brought it to me, and I just got shivers. Just the thought, you know the hyenas did not touch him, and the act of defiance—God lives even in spite of the hyenas."<sup>3</sup>

You may not be at risk from hyenas, but as you navigate your way through life, day by day, you're familiar with other risks and threats whose presence seems to thwart the will and purposes of God. And yet, the promise of God's protective presence holds. Even in death, God kept Jesus, and brought him forth in victory. Our assurance is that God will do the same for all those who believe in Christ and belong to him.

Where can you get help? Where can you look for help? What do you trust when the threats and dangers start closing in? In the fall of 2008, when Hurricane Gustav was bearing down on New Orleans, city officials had ordered residents to evacuate. One woman named Hattie decided to stay put. She told reporters that she had what she needed to ride out the storm, explaining, "I've got liquor, cash, food, ammo, and weed." I don't know what became of Hattie, but when it comes to provision and protection, it sounds like she wasn't looking very far beyond her immediate space and her own resources.

The psalmist offers us a different way. "I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." By making that statement of faith, you're not just declaring where you go for help. You're also declaring where you don't go for help. You're confessing that your help doesn't come from your own strength, or from your bank account, or from your righteous deeds, or from your connections, or from your knowledge, or from your wit and wisdom. "My help comes from the Lord." That rules out everything except the faithfulness of God, in whatever ways he makes his help and saving power available to us.

When we sing "Amazing Grace," we declare, "Through many dangers, toils and snares, / I have already come; / 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, / And grace will lead me home." As we follow Jesus on the way that leads into the fullness of God's presence, remember that God is your keeper. The Maker of heaven and earth watches over you. Your help comes from him. "The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore" (vv. 7-8).

<sup>1</sup> Eric Metaxas, "Harriet Tubman, on the Money," *Breakpoint* (May 6, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Sweet, *SoulSalsa* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> From Timothy George, "Delighted by Doctrine." *Christian History & Biography* (Summer 2006).