

“Dependence: From Where Will my Help Come?”

Psalm 121

Rev. Katherine C. Kerr

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte

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“I will lift up my eyes unto the hills.” Before I ever knew that these words were the opening verse of a Psalm, they held special meaning to me. They figured prominently in one of the most extraordinary views I have ever seen, and became indelibly written on my heart through some of the best experiences of my life.

These words are painted across a beam at the front of Symmes Chapel at YMCA Camp Greenville in the mountains on the border of North and South Carolina. Better known as Pretty Place, this open-air chapel is at the end of a road, perched on the side of a mountain. Its view over Jones Gap below and across many mountain peaks in the distance is unparalleled, and complemented by a large wooden cross and these words from Psalm 121. “I will lift up my eyes unto the hills.”

Long before I took seriously the study of God’s Word, before the thought of going into the ministry had ever entered my head or my heart, I knew these words like I knew my own name. “I will lift up my eyes unto the hills.” Growing up in Florida, the opportunity to spend a few weeks each summer at a camp in the mountains was one of the greatest joys of my childhood. I loved the mountains, and still do. In them, I find comfort and inspiration. At Pretty Place, I sang camp songs and worshipped God, I talked to friends and dreamed about the future. With such a stunning backdrop, anything felt possible there.

But Pretty Place was also always a reminder that, even in the best of times, life can be uncertain. The most breathtaking mountain views have a way of doing that for us, because in order to have the most magnificent vantage point, one must be at the right at the edge. The vast expanse of air below, while

exhilarating, can also be terrifying. As many times as I reveled in the beauty and comfort of Pretty Place and its view, there were plenty of times when I was brought back to reality by it as well.

Stepping out onto the rock over the wall and beyond the cross, I was keenly aware that one missed step could bring instant devastation. At night, while soaking up the impossibly star-filled sky, we would occasionally hear an animal wail eerily in the distance. And one night, my friends and I heard a cry for help from two stranded hikers somewhere in the vast darkness below us.

At Pretty Place I learned very quickly that, like so many things in life, the mountains I loved could be the source of both comfort and discomfort at the same time.

The writer of Psalm 121 knew something about this. Looking up to the hills, he wonders, “from where will my help come?” Scholars disagree on the interpretation of these verses. Some read this as the psalmist gazing in awe at a majestic mountain range, reminded of God’s glory, and seeing his help coming from the heights. Others see the psalmist as sensing danger from the mountains, as mysterious as they can be, and wondering where his protection will come from.

There are over 500 scriptural references to hills or mountains. One scholar refers to them as “a master image of the Bible . . . declar[ing] the nature of God.”¹ They are often seen as a haven of refuge and sometimes experienced as a place of threat and danger. Biblical mountains are places of encounters with God, of spiritual experiences and revelations. But they are also places fraught with real danger from real enemies. As with most things in our faith and in our lives, scriptural mountains are multi-dimensional.

Perhaps this uncertainty about the nature of the mountains the psalmist gazes upon is intentional. However one views the hills in Psalm 121; whether as a refuge or as a threat, the bulk of the psalm contains one of the most unequivocal statements of faith to be found in scripture. Verses 2-8 leave no

¹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, Eds. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), p. 574.

room for doubt as to the source and the certainty of the Psalmist's – and the reader's – help.

“My help comes from the Lord.”

Since my experience with the opening words of this Psalm as a young girl, I have come to embrace the full psalm in a very different context today. It is one of my favorite passages of scripture for a number of reasons, chief among which is that it is often chosen by families to be read at the funerals of their loved ones. Sometimes this is because of the mountain imagery, but it is also because this psalm is fundamentally an unmitigated declaration of faith in God's protective power. There is great power in reading these words in the context of a worship service celebrating the life of someone and entrusting them to God's eternal keeping.

In the face of something as absolute as death, little is as comforting as the assurance that, no matter what, we are kept forever by our God.

As we make our way on our annual journey of Lent, we are brought once again face to face with a hard reality of our faith. The God who took on flesh and walked among us, teaching, healing and forgiving, died an incredibly cruel and tragic death.

We cannot escape the truth of Good Friday – the brokenness in the world then was as real as it is today.

But neither can we ignore the Easter truth – death did not win. God didn't leave Christ on the cross. He doesn't leave us in our darkness and despair either.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we have an understandably dualistic view of death- on the one hand, we fear it for it is the end of our life on earth. This is healthy and serves us well through most of our lives. On the other hand, however, our faith reminds us that death is not the absolute end, as we know we have been promised eternal life in Jesus Christ.

The reality is that life is full of moments of deep sorrow as well as moments of great joy. So much so that it can be overwhelming at times. We have all, at one point or another, surely wondered, “from where will my help come?”

The Psalmist gives us words when we struggle to find them. And so we can declare with confidence that our help comes from the Lord. As we live, we are protected by our God, so that “the sun shall not strike [us] by day, nor the moon by night.” Wherever we go, whatever we do, in every moment of our lives, our loving God watches out for us.

Yet, we are human, and at some point, we will all die. This is reality. But it is not reality without hope. For “The Lord will keep [our] going out and [our] coming in from this time on and forevermore.” God’s love and protection are not bound by our earthly lives. They are forevermore. Not just in the span of this life, but in the span of eternity.

In just a moment, our worship will continue with an offering of music, Gabriel Faure’s *Requiem*, written in the late 19th century. A *Requiem* is a mass for the dead, and that word has come to mean any musical piece related to death and mourning. Faure’s *Requiem* is one of the better known of the more than 2,000 *Requiem*s composed.

Having provided music for countless funeral services during his life, Faure had ample opportunity to contemplate his own faith and his belief in eternal life. He put much of this belief into the composition of the *Requiem*, which he described as being, “dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest.”² It is, then, not a mournful, fearful piece, like some other *Requiem*s. Rather, the melodic strains and powerful moments reflect a confidence and hope that can only be rooted in faith in God’s everlasting care.

As you listen to this music, lift up your eyes. Lift up your minds. Lift up your hearts and know with certainty that your help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

² www.wikipedia.com; Requiem (Faure).

