

Psalm 121:1-8 (NRSV)

*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.*

On the morning of January 10th, Paul Salopek left *Herto Bouri*, a village in Ethiopia, and began walking northeast. Today, he's probably somewhere in Palestine, still walking. Before he started he posted a picture of his house keys on his website, asking: "Do I leave them, or take them with?" Because his walk won't end for seven years (I assume he's single!). He will walk until he reaches the eastern tip of Siberia, then board a ship to Alaska, where he resumes walking, until he reaches *Tiera del Fuego*, at the southern tip of Chile, 21,000 miles in all.

But if all he does is walk 21,000 miles in 7 years, it will be meaningless. He's not a tourist; he's a journalist, following the broken trail left by our first human ancestors starting 60,000 years ago near *Herto Bouri* that leads across the Bering Strait into the Americas. It's more pilgrimage than hike.

I believe there are three kinds of people: settlers (who find a comfortable place and stay), nomads (who wander aimlessly), and *pilgrims*, who walk by faith toward what they have not yet found, but believe is real and worth the journey. There's a lot of nomad in me; but if I listen to what the Spirit says—in what I observe, hear, or read, as in this text—I realize: there is one thing I must be: a pilgrim. Our faith is filled with pilgrim language: "*forgetting those things which are behind...the Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth...Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not*

see...They admitted they were aliens and strangers...looking for a better country...” You will find little comfort in Scripture for a faith that settles in and doesn’t move.

In Genesis 12, Abraham is called to go on a pilgrimage, perhaps history’s most important, one which involved risk, cost, and unintended consequences. In ancient times, travel was dangerous. You traveled on foot in unfamiliar places, with unknown dangers. It still does. Ask the passengers on *Malaysian Air Flight 370*. But pilgrims face unique risks as well. A pilgrim has to let go of something, including the ability to settle for “good enough.” They relinquish control over what they may find, in order to gain their soul. Pilgrims often return to the home from which they started, but when they do, they are not the same person, and never will be again. Pilgrimage is a path to rebirth.

Pilgrimages aren’t always geographic. Changes in our lives, even unwelcome ones, invite us into a pilgrimage. Education, marriage, retirement, growing up or growing older, grief—all these are “stealth pilgrimages” that lead us to new and unfamiliar places from which we can never completely return. Pastor Bill’s Sabbatical is changing him (and us) as we speak. The changes may be subtle or dramatic, but we may have to get reacquainted when he returns.

Lent is a pilgrimage, in which we are called to accompany Jesus on His pilgrimage to the cross, picking up ours, and learning from Him along the way.

Psalm 121 is part of a set of psalms—hymns, really—that ancient pilgrims sang during their travels to Jerusalem. There is power in these words. Imagine that you live 3,000 years ago; you step through the city gates, look down a barely discernable footpath, and when you look up, you see in the distance...

“I lift my eyes to the hills...” If you’re on foot, the hills aren’t scenery. They are

an obstacle at best, and a life-threatening barrier as well. So: “*from where does my help come?*” Who do we trust, when we have nowhere to hide? Hopefully, we can sing as that ancient pilgrim: “*My help comes from the Lord...*”

And then your fellow pilgrims sing in response: “*The Lord is your keeper...your shade... The Lord will keep you from all evil; God will keep your life.*” This is not hyperbole. Those who sang these words knew quite well that if they journeyed, they may not come home. So what *were* they thinking?

Their faith was in a God who is “*The Maker of Heaven and Earth.*” Surrounded by pagan deities whose followers believed that their god slept, or only ruled their little town, the psalmist sang something like *I do not know what I will face on these hills, but I do not walk them alone; I trust a God who doesn't slumber.* It is not God's promise to remove all risk, all contingency, from life. But as Psalm 23 affirms, we learn that whether through green pastures or the darkest valleys, God leads us, to a place where we are guests at God's table. *God, they sang, will watch over my life, in the midst of whatever I encounter along the way.*

We are all on a journey—*life is a journey.* Is it for us a pilgrimage? We are surrounded by settlers, comfortable where they are, closed to what God may yet say, unwilling to follow God's still-unfolding call. But we are called to follow. In John 3, Jesus invites Nicodemus to step away from his well-organized, comfortable life, and embark on a pilgrimage, one that will challenge him to re-think everything he thinks he knows, but will make him new again, a person reborn.

Whether Nicodemus accepted that invitation or chose to remain in his orderly, predictable life, I hope I will always have the courage to follow, because it is my calling,

and I have learned that it is pilgrims who, like Abraham, change history. They must not be held back, but cheered on their way. Our ancestors came to the new world on a pilgrimage for a better life, like many today, who as we speak are walking across deserts and mountains and borders, hungry for more than mere survival. They believe that things do not have to be as they have been, that the world can change for them, if they do not give up. This, I believe, is *their* psalm, and may it be ours as well.

In Jewish homes on the bedroom wall, in the delivery room, or perhaps pinned to a baby carriage, you often find the benediction at the end of this psalm: “*The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time forth, and forever more.*” We all need to be encouraged on life’s long pilgrimage. There are no guarantees, but our Keeper-God, who made heaven and earth and holds it still, guides us through green pastures, dark valleys—and hills—so that no matter where we wander, and even when we feel lost, we are pilgrims on a good path, and God will lead us home.

(Logos notes)

Verses 7-8: God's protection is both physical and spiritual. It is also total: God will watch over our whole life.

(McCann notes)

Part of a collection: Psalm 120-134: 'Ascent' or (CEB) "Pilgrimage"

Possible sequence of 120-122: Outside The Land...Journey...Completion

(Psalm 131 by a woman?)

Also Psalm 48—clarifies the purpose of 121's pilgrimage

:1 "hills": anticipating a journey, and not seeing either the destination or the surprises, challenges.

"keep": 6 times

:7 "evil" better "calamity"?

:8 "moon": common fear that the moon could be dangerous.
God's keeping is perpetual.

Rolf Jacobson

Many readers of Psalm 121 have connected it with life's ... **journeys**. A friend ... has written quite a bit about the psalms calls this one, "A Psalm for Sojourners."¹

... the "psalms of ascent." ... all bear the superscription *shir-hamma'alot* or *shir-lammal'alot* translated in the NRSV as "a song of ascents" or "a song of ascent." The best guess is that these psalms were collected to be used in conjunction with a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. For that reason, Psalm 121 is most commonly understood as *a liturgy of blessing for one about to leave on a journey...*

verses 1-2 A Traveler's Question and Confession

verses 3-8 A Priestly Blessing

A Traveler's Question and Confession

¹ I lift my eyes to the hills --
from where will my help come?

² My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

... Where can I get help? Or better, where can I look for help?

[An aside: ... "Hey, the opening verse does not *have to be* translated as a question, does it?" And this is true. Ancient Hebrew had no punctuation, so the only way to signal a question was either through inverted word order or through the use of an interrogative particle such as "where" (*'ayin*), "how" (*mah*), or "why" (*lamah*). But Hebrew poetry

often inverts word order for, well, poetic reasons. And sometimes interrogative particles are used to signal exclamations rather than questions. As in: How cool is that!! Or: Who's the boss now!! The Hebrew in the second half of verse one reads: me'ayin yabo' ezriy. Literally, "from where comes my help." Although ... "from where my help will come" is possible (so KJV), ..., "from whence cometh my help?/from where will my help come?" is more likely (so NRSV, RSV, NIV, NJPS, NAB, NJB, etc).]

... many interpreters imagine a traveler about to depart on a journey ... Such a question is a natural -- whether one is thinking of a geographic journey through dangerous territory, a lifelong journey through many ups and downs, or a spiritual journey to discovery seeking a homecoming to God.

... dangers. The physical... The economic... The spiritual: doubt, sin, evil, corruption, fundamentalism, extremism, or false teaching.

What more natural question to ask than, "From whence shall my help come?" ... consider giving the congregation a minute or two to discuss the greatest fears and threats that they or a loved one faces right now. ...or even to bring written responses that can be collected and set before the altar of God. Or ask them to share a fear with a neighbor.

The psalmist ...: "My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth."

Modern translations obscure the poetic, chiasmic structure of the sentence. The word "my-help" is the last word of verse 1 and the first word of verse 2. ... a hyphen indicates when several English words are translating one Hebrew word:

I-lift my-eyes to-the-hills
from-where shall-come my-help
my-help from-with YHWH
maker of-heaven and-earth.

The verse is a chiasm:

A creation (hills)
B whence comes my help
B' my help is from the Lord
A creation (heaven and earth)

The psalmist does not look to nature for help! Those hills, after all, might be hiding some threat, some predator. The psalmist's help comes from the very one who made the hills, the heavens and the earth: God! ...

... render this confession of faith -- "my help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth"-- available to the congregation. That is often the best way to preach a psalm -- to teach and preach about the prayer in order that the congregation may enter into the poem and become the speaker. If you gave people a chance to name the threats and fears they face, invite them to stare those fears down by saying these words out loud: My help comes from the Lord, who make heaven and earth.

The rest of the psalm is a blessing. The pronouns switch now from the first-person “my” and “I” of verses 1-2, to second-person singular “you” and “your.” Many interpreters imagine a change of speaker, most likely a priestly figure -- ...The genre here is benediction. An under-utilized genre in our world.

Verses 3-8 have two parallel “legs.” The key word is keep/keeper -- which translates the Hebrew word *shamar*. Although most English translations obscure this, in the first leg, the benediction uses the masculine, singular participial form: keeper. In the second leg, the form switching to the third, masculine, singular imperfect form: he will keep.

The following translation seeks to show the structure:

- ³ He will not let your foot be moved;
your keeper will not slumber.
⁴ Israel’s keeper
will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
⁷ The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
⁸ The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore.

The logical movement here is from God identity and character to God identifying and characteristic actions. Who is God? God is a keeper. God’s identity is to protect, shield, watch over, guard, keep. God does this like a watchman keeping guard over a city (130:8) or a bird shielding its young in the shelter of his wings (91:4).

What does God promise to do? God promises to keep you. God will guard you as you go on your journey of life, and as you return home. As you go out and come in. As you face the dangers of the day and of the night.

The list of promises here is not meant to suggest that those who walk in the shelter of God will face no harm or that nothing ill will befall them. ...meant as characteristic promises -- these are the sort of things that the Lord does for those who rely on him. ...For this reason, it is *common for Jewish families to post Psalm 121 in the delivery room, or in baby carriages, or in a child’s room.*

... the genre of blessing is under-utilized in today’s world. ... *every child of God should give and receive a blessing every day.* In our home, we make the sign of the cross on each other’s forehead and bless each other every night before bed with words borrowed from the baptismal service. ...

... Psalm 121 ...a great blessing. ...close ... by *asking the congregation to bless each other*, making the sign of the cross on each other and saying, “**The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time on and forevermore.**”

In the three great Western religions, prayer and travel are intricately connected in the notion of pilgrimage. Islam has the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca a believer is expected to make once in a lifetime. Many Christians visit shrines, cathedrals, monasteries, even the Holy Land, for inspiration. Before the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., Jews flocked to Jerusalem for Passover and other holy days. Indeed, the spirituality of the feasts began with the first steps of the pilgrimage. (Larry Broding)

... used by pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for one of the three yearly festivals (Deuteronomy 16:16). ...made in full recognition of false gods all around who compete for our devotion. ...If the "hills" connote the hilltops around Jerusalem where shrines of other gods were located, the affirmation is intended to distinguish the Lord from other deities.... the qualifying title, "Maker of heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:2b). This description appears only once ... but its importance cannot be captured in numerical occurrences. ... two other times in the "Songs of Ascent" (Psalms 124:8; 134:3). ... "Maker of heaven and earth" to be a central tenet of faith in the Songs of Ascent. Even if on a short journey to Jerusalem, the traveler surely observed worship sites devoted to other deities (on "the hills"), ...to confess that Yahweh was "Maker of heaven and earth" was to declare these other deities ineffectual. The significance ... in the Church is clarified by its use in the Apostles' Creed...Israel's God "does not sleep or slumber." ... the common belief among Israel's neighbors that their gods "slept" (or died) during winter months and were revived in seasons of growth and harvest. But the Lord did not sleep and therefore could keep constant watch over Israel and its pilgrims. The point is emphasized by the six occurrences of the word "keep" or "keeper" to describe what Yahweh does and who Yahweh is...The final four verses of the psalm are spoken again by a "leader" and take the form of a "blessing"; that is, they are confessional, but since they are spoken on behalf of the pilgrims they have the tone of wish and assurance. Verse 5 is a general word about the character of the protector of the pilgrims. A new label, "your shade" is introduced there...ancient people believed the moon to be a cause of lunacy (hence, our term "lunatic" from the Latin word for "moon"). More is involved than just the threat of two luminaries, however. Both the sun and the moon were thought to represent deities: for example, the Egyptian god, Ra (the sun god) and the Mesopotamian, Nanna (the moon god).the main issue in the psalm is the safety God provides through constant attention to the faithful pilgrims. (Jerome Creach)