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The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Psalm 121



Grace and peace to you from God — our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

“Oh no! What am I going to do now?” Excuse my exclamation, but I think these “oh no!” moments are known by us all. It would be difficult to get through life without such an experience of panic and confusion. Can you relate?

We all know the feeling of disappointment or dread or even despair. That sinking feeling inside of you, when it feels like the bottom is falling out from beneath your feet, when you realize something troubling for the first time or hear some challenging or scary news. “Oh no! How am I going to get through this?” Or, in the words of today’s psalm, “from where will my help come?”

Many modern translations, musical settings, and cultural references distort the meaning of Psalm 121, especially the opening line. The first line is, in fact, itself a realization followed by a question, which is then answered by the rest of the psalm. The first line by itself is not a statement: the psalmist does not look to the hills for help, as the King James Version for example would have us believe. Those hills were actually a place of danger. And so, the psalmist describes lifting their eyes to the hills, pausing, feeling that sinking “oh no” moment, and then she wonders aloud, “from where will my help come?” Question mark.

And so, the psalm starts with a question, not an affirmation, and the rest of the psalm gives an answer. Saving help does not come from the hills, which are dangerous terrain, but from the Lord, who is Creator of the hills, heaven, and earth.

Psalm 121 is a “pilgrim song,” it was intended to be chanted by a traveler on their journey to Jerusalem. It is part of a group of psalms called “Songs of Ascent.” It is the ancient equivalent of a song we might sing together while hiking at camp or on a retreat.

The psalmist, though, had good reason to be afraid on his ascent, on his pilgrim journey through the hills to Jerusalem. The hills of Palestine were not places of refuge, but places of danger where thieves took refuge. They were not wooded slopes but rather bare and open to the scorching sun, and exposed to the light of the moon at night, which the ancient Hebrew people considered to be an evil influence. Those hills or mountains, then, are not the place of divine help; they are the source of danger and distress. So rather than looking to the hills for help, the pilgrim psalmist actually surveys the landscape at

the beginning of his journey and upon seeing those hills is struck by a moment of fear and panic. I lift my eyes to the hills, and realize, oh my goodness, from where will my help come? How am I going to get through this? Have you ever been faced with a sight or realization and had the same reaction? I bet you have.

In addition to being a song of ascent, this psalm is also a song of trust. For all the fear and doubt and concern bundled up in that opening question, the rest of the psalm is an amazing declaration and reassurance of trust and faith in God. It is a kind of spiritual and theological pep talk the psalmist gives himself. In response to a moment of fear, he leans on a lifetime of knowledge and experience to remind himself that he can trust in God. It is in the moments of fear, doubt, despair, and uncertainty that we too have to remind ourselves of the goodness of God shown forth in our lives.

The hills might be a place of danger where thieves take refuge, open to the scorching sun and exposed to the light of the evil moon. But the psalmist's help comes from somewhere more powerful, from the Lord, who made heaven and earth and those very hills. The Lord watches over her and will not let her feet slip as she climbs those hills. As the psalmist sleeps, the Lord will not sleep, the Lord will watch over her and protect her from all harm. The Lord will be her shade and shield her from the burning sun and the evil moon. The Lord will protect her from everything that is dangerous in those hills, and will preserve her life. And what's more, the Lord will watch over every journey this pilgrim makes, all her going outs and coming ins, for her whole life, from this time on and forevermore.

I don't think this traveler could have expressed this kind of deep and certain trust in God if he hadn't already known it to be true. Surely he must have had experiences, personally or seen them in his community, that proved God's faithfulness to him. He must have had experiences to build up that trust in God, so that when this particular moment of panic came, he was able to remind himself of all of the ways in which he knew and had known and expected to always know God's guidance and protection. He didn't have to imagine something new — he simply had to remind himself of what had always been. The same is true for us.

I wonder this morning, what are the panic moments in your life like, past and present? When have you lifted your eyes to the hills, discovered something scary, and thought to yourself "oh no! How will I get through this?" How many times in our lives do we have that same

sudden realization of fear or anxiety. An “oh no” moment, or worse, a moment when we’re faced with the reality that things might not be okay, or at least that things might not be the same as the before times. These moments come to us big and small, from sitting at the airport and realizing we left something important at home, to receiving an unexpected diagnosis, to an accident, to uncertainty about a family situation or relationship, to losing a job and wondering how we will get by. And in these moments we become like the psalmist in their opening line, both acknowledging our fear and wondering aloud about who can possibly help us.

The psalmist also teaches us something very important, though. They teach us in these moments of fear and desperation to look to the past and to remember what we know to be true about God. The psalmist models for us that even in moments of panic, memory is a powerful tool. We can remind ourselves that God is our Creator and has been our Redeemer and will always be our Sustainer. We can remind ourselves that God has made everything in this world, including us, and that God knows and has taken on our fears in Jesus Christ. We can remind ourselves of all the ways that God has gotten us through and provided for us and our communities in the past. We can remind ourselves of trust in God because we have that relationship and history with God. We know that God is faithful, and that our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

The psalmist’s reassurance comes from remembering that dangerous though the hills may be, God is even bigger. God the creator made those hills and mountains and sun and moon. God the redeemer has saved the pilgrim before. And God the sustainer will preserve them from all evil and will keep their life. God is this pilgrim’s refuge and strength on the journey.

The same holds true for us. In all of life’s “oh no” moments, we put our faith and trust in God. Not naively, but rather because we know and have experienced God’s steadfast love and faithfulness in our lives and know it to be true. We trust in God because we have seen God provide for us and for our communities in the past, because we are sustained and supported by God’s goodness now, and because God has promised to continue to watch over us from this time forth and forevermore.

And so, gathered here together as fellow pilgrims on our journey of faith, we worship God who is the source of our strength and the rock of our lives. Amen.