God's Playlist Sermon Series
Psalm 121
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Do you have a favorite poem? I know the English teachers among us are mentally and very enthusiastically raising their hands. I know some folks are lovers of poetry, while others' favorite poem starts with, "Roses are red, violets are blue…" For me, I love Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" and pretty much anything by Dr. Suess. That counts, right?

The Psalms are not narratives or history or letters like most of the Bible; they are poetry. Now, poetry written in English can be challenging enough to study, so imagine trying to do the same thing in ancient Hebrew, which was written right to left and had no vowels! This style of poetry is a little more involved than writing a haiku or rhyming words at the end of lines. Poetry is meant to evoke emotions and invite imagination, which can make it difficult to understand 2000 years later.

Psalm 121 is a great example of this. Reading it in English, we lose the alliteration, the repetition, the call and response feature of this psalm. If we breeze through it too fast, we miss the meaning of the question, the power of the promises, the deep anointing of the blessing. This poem is meant to be experienced, not just read. I mean, can you fully appreciate "Oh the Places You'll Go" in only one reading? There's a reason poems written centuries ago are still read today. They resonate with us through all generations, in all stages of life.

We start our look at this psalm before the first verse, with what is called the superscription. A little over a third of the psalms have some sort of opening words of instructions. Often times, the superscription simply gives an author's name, as in "a psalm of David." Other times it gives specific instrumental instructions, like Psalm 76, which says, "to the leader, with stringed instruments." Sometimes it even gives specific tunes names, like the superscription of Psalm 56, which says, "to the tune of 'A Dove on Distant Oaks'." Cindy/Jane, can you play a few bars of that for us?

The superscription of Psalm 121 says it is a "song of ascents." In fact, psalms 120-134 all have this same superscription. Three times a year, Jews from all over the region were required to travel to Jerusalem to partake in a religious festival. So, they would pack up their stuff and head off toward Jerusalem and the Temple, which sat up on a hill. As they were ascending toward their destination, they would most likely sing spiritual songs to pass the time and to remind them of God's presence with them. Those would be called songs of ascents.

It reminds me of a church I know of that was started on the outskirts of a growing university town. The land picked for the new church building had a covering of trees on it, and it was situated on a slight rise in the land, a crest, if you will. So, that church was named Crestwood. Every time you come to worship here, you are ascending, if ever so slightly.

So, how might the meaning of this psalm change for us if we hear it as traveling music through the ears of a pilgrim on the way to Jerusalem? Let's see. "I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?" For travelers, hills could have all kinds of different meanings. They might be a source of protection from bad weather, or could even signify the ending of their journey if the hill they see is Jerusalem. But the hills also contained many dangers, like robbers and predatory animals. And Jews would have known that many pagan religions had their

worship spaces built on the tops of the hills around Jerusalem. So, as they looked at the hills, which were full of promise and danger, they were reminded that they needed help.

This always makes me think of the first pilgrims who traveled west in our country. Can you imagine hitching up your covered wagon, gathering all your family and livestock and supplies, and heading west, hoping to avoid predators and bad weather and dysentery? And then, way off in the distance, you see these small hills that, as you get closer, grow bigger...and bigger…and bigger…until you realize those small hills are what we know as the Rocky Mountains? Can you imagine being the first travelers to see the Rockies? "I lift my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come?"

For the psalmist, that help comes from the one who made the hills in the first place: "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." This same God who created heaven and earth also watches over us. The next line says, "He will not let your foot be moved," which is more accurately translated as, "He will not let your foot slip." I was leaning into that promise one November when my friend and I journeyed to Great Smoky Mountains National Park to climb Mt. LeConte. The trail is long and a little challenging, especially as we encountered more snow and ice as we got further up. There was one stretch where you walk along a ledge with a steep drop-off, and you only had a metal chain to hold onto to keep you from slipping. "He will not let your foot be moved" was my mantra that got we through that hike.

The journey to Jerusalem would undoubtedly involve walking on narrow paths, some of which may have steep drop-offs and no guardrails. One misstep and your song would end in a hurry. But God will not let your foot slip. Whether you walk confidently, stagger along, or use a cane or walker, God watches over you.

Even when it feels like God is far away from us, like God has turned God's face from us and fallen asleep on the job, the psalm assures us that, "He who keeps you will neither slumber nor sleep." Pagan gods were thought to fall asleep during the winter, waking again for seasons of growth and harvest. At their lowest, the psalms even accuse God of this, like in Psalm 44: "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!"

But the author of Psalm 121 knows God doesn't sleep. Yahweh is not subject to such bouts of drowsiness. The journey to Jerusalem could be long, treacherous, exhausting. At the end of each day, the weary travelers would have to set up camp in unknown territory. But this psalm reminds them they didn't have to sleep with one eye open because God had both eyes open, watching over them. We get tired, we wear out, our journeys seem never-ending, but God watches over us.

Once the pilgrims woke up and started back on the road, God was still with them, providing shade for them from the dangers of the sun and moon. Now, we understand about the dangers of the sun, but has anyone here ever bought a tube of moonscreen? Today, the moon poses no threat to us – unless you're married to a werewolf! – but back then, before they had a full understanding of how the solar system worked, people blamed the moon for all sorts of trouble. Moonlight was thought to cause epilepsy and general craziness; the word "lunatic" comes from the Latin word for "moon." So, people needed protection from the heat of the day and the dark of night, and once again, God provides. And once again, we see a subtle dig at the false gods worshipped by the surrounding nations, including the sun and moon gods. The Israelites only needed one God, who they believed had power over the sun and moon and everything else. Whether it's day or night, God watches over us.

In the last two verses, the scope of the psalm moves from a specific journey to a blessing for all those on a journey. "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life." These

verses can be translated multiple ways, which impacts the meaning for us. Another way to say it is, "The Lord will keep you from all harm; he will guard your soul." For me, there's a big difference between God protecting me from evil and keeping me from harm, and from God guarding my soul and God guarding my life. That's illustrates both the beauty and frustration of the psalms. They are intentionally ambiguous, leaving open a spectrum of interpretations, which means we have to do the work of figuring out what they mean to us personally. Right now, which means more to you: God protecting you from evil or keeping you from harm? God guarding your soul or your life?

The psalm ends with a sweeping statement, reminding us that God is with us during our going out (of worship) and our coming in (to worship). After our kids leave Children's Time, those in second grade and below go to our Worship and Wonder rooms to be immersed in a story from the Bible and asking wondering questions about it. But, before they go in the room, the adult Greeter gives them a blessing and asks, "Are you ready for worship?" And when they leave the room, they are given a fist bump or a hug and words of blessing, which in one person's case, are "May God bless the socks off your week." They are blessed, not just in words but by the presence of the adults who care for them and shower them with Christ's love.

"The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore." This psalm promises us God's blessing, both now during our current pilgrimage and for all the pilgrimages afterwards. This is no longer a song about the journey to Jerusalem; it is about the journey of life. From the moment Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden, God's people have been on a journey. Abraham and Sarah, the Israelites in the desert, the itinerant disciples, even Jesus himself – all of them were pilgrims passing through, walking the way God had put before them. We are doing the same, nomads in this world whose citizenship is in heaven. As we make our way, placing one foot in front of the other, ascending to worship and descending into the world, Psalm 121 reminds us there is no place we can go that is outside of God's gracious realm. God is always with us. God watches over us.

The pilgrims to Jerusalem didn't just remember this psalm or recite it in their heads. They sang it, out loud, together, joining their voices in an exercise of proclaiming God's protection and provision, God's watching and keeping, even as the hills threatened and path grew narrow. You see, this journey of faith? It's not a solo endeavor. It's a communal affair, something we're meant to do with other travelers who have the same aspirations and doubts and fears as us. We are not on this journey alone. So, like those who ascended to Jerusalem, let's sing this psalm together.