



You are important to God and to us.
Feel free to share your thoughts,
your comments and your
questions at:
alane.miller@att.net

Our Source of Help

(Assurance)

Psalm 121

July 3, 2005

Do you remember where you were and what you were doing on December 7, 1941? How about November 22, 1963 or September 11, 2001? Maybe you weren't born yet and those dates don't stir your memory. But what about the bombing of Pearl Harbor? The assassination of John Kennedy? Or the bombing of the World Trade Center? If you were alive then and older than two or three, I suspect that you do remember. Those were events that reshaped us and our world. Those events reminded us yet again that we live in a dangerous, often violent, very unpredictable world. Those are the events that force us to look for security and assurance when the very foundations of our lives are being shaken?

Those are some would like to consider those questions with you this morning as we look together at Psalm 121. Before I do, again let me say that this morning I am again continuing the series entitled *Out of the Depths*. In this series we are looking together at the Psalms and at what they have to tell us about what it means to be men and women . . . created by God . . . living in connection to God and to one another and experiencing the very real . . . very human emotions that God has put in each of us.

The Psalm begins with the words – *I lift up my eyes to the hills . . .*

Mountains were a major part of my world in many of my first 49 years of my life. I was born in a hospital just 'over the mountain' from the home town in which I would spend most of the first 18 years of my life. I graduated from high school and went to college in the Shenandoah Valley in sight of the Blue Ridge mountains of VA. After college I served with the Mennonite Central Committee in Botswana, Africa. Again, I lived within a half mile of Baratane Peak, one of the few mountains in Botswana.

I was not quite so fortunate over the next eleven years, living first in the flat lands of northern Indiana and then in the relatively flat northern Montgomery County, PA. But then it was back to the Cumberland Valley in sight of both South Mountain and the Blue Mountains of Franklin and Cumberland Counties for the next twelve and a high years. So about 37 out of 49 years were in sight of the mountains. Perhaps it is not surprising that Psalm 121 would become one of my favorite Psalms. It was one that I memorized as a teen and have often enjoyed since.

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills—

I lift up my eyes to the hills . . . mountains quite naturally draw our eyes upward. Whether that is the smaller ridges and mountains of the east . . . or the majestic peaks of the west . . . mountains draw our gaze toward the heavens. What are the words that come to mind when you want to describe mountains? I think of words like mighty . . . enduring . . . serene.

As a youth and later as a young adult, I believed that the Psalmist was telling us that our help came from the hills or was from God coming down from the hills. As I was preparing for the message this morning, I discovered that is a common mistake. Part of the misunderstanding may come from the King James translation that many of us learned when we were young. That translation reads:

I lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.

But as many scholars have pointed out, the original Hebrew is not making a statement, but rather asking a question.

*¹I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?*

Why would the Psalmist ask that question? The title at the beginning of this Psalm reads – *A Song of Ascents*. It is part of the group of Psalm 120 – 134. Many believe that these are the songs sung by the pilgrims as they made their journey up the final mountain slopes on their

way to Jerusalem. Pilgrimages were a regular part of ancient Jewish worship. There were three major festivals in Biblical times. The Israelites were encouraged to make a trip to Jerusalem at least once a year for one of those celebrations. As the Jewish people were scattered throughout the ancient empire, for some the journey to Jerusalem would indeed be the trip of a lifetime.

For the ancients that could be a very dangerous journey. Imagine if you can that you were from Galilee on your way to Jerusalem. That's a distance of about 120 miles. 120 miles that you would walk. Of course people were used to walking back then, but that's still a journey of four or five days. You are approaching the mountains of Jerusalem. These were not the friendly rolling hills of Galilee. These were the steep foreboding peaks that ringed Jerusalem. These often concealed thieves and bandits who lay in wait to rob and to murder the weak and unsuspecting. Do you understand what prompted the pilgrim to ask the question?

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?*

But maybe you are asking another question . . . if a pilgrimage was really that difficult, why bother? Why not just stay at home and experience God there. After all, isn't God everywhere? Why does anyone have to go to a special place? I was doing some reading about pilgrimages this week. One author described a pilgrimage as a sacred quest. It is a journey in which the traveler expects to experience in a new way the presence of God. Many of us have had mountaintop experiences at one time or another in our lives. But we also know that mountaintop experiences rarely happen in the plains of our everyday existence. Mountaintop experiences are often the result of a pilgrimage.

Some of us have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Lands or to the Eder River in Schwarzenau, Germany. For some of us that pilgrimage has been to a work camp, a disaster response trip or a mission trip. Some have gone to Women of Faith or Promise Keepers. I have one friend who does wilderness camping. He has talked about the powerful sense of God's presence that he feels in the wilderness. The older I get the more I appreciate the importance of the need to take sacred journeys.

At least one question, this Psalm prompts me to ask is, "Are we pilgrims on a journey?" Then the Psalmist asks that we consider a different question – as we travel, where do we look to for our security? About two weeks ago, several of us attended the seminar on the Pastor's Insurance Plan. Allen Hansell read this Psalm. Allen made the observation that the neighbors of the Israelites often selected the hills and the high places as the sites on which they built their pagan temples. Another very appropriate question to ask as we read this Psalm is "Which God do I trust?"

There are many gods in our world. Last evening I brought the message at the Jesus, Son of God concert in New Holland Park. I told the group that we all were believers. We all need to believe in something. That's hardwired into our spiritual DNA. We might believe in different things, but we all believe in something.

Where do we find our security? Money . . . fame . . . control . . . power . . . other people . . . Do we really believe that God is our security? Are we living that way?

I look to the hills? From where will my help come? Do we know that our help comes from God. This is the Fourth of July Weekend. It is a time when we remember and celebrate that we live in the United States of America. We have much for which we should be grateful. We enjoy material abundance. We enjoy the freedom of worship. We enjoy liberties that other people around the globe can hardly imagine.

At the same time we need to be very, very careful. It is easy to believe that we enjoy these freedoms because we are good as opposed to the rest of the world that is evil. Preachers constantly face the temptation to dissect, to analyze, to explain. Yes, some passages of scripture do need some explaining. Yet, there is far more at stake than just looking at little pieces. Are we trusting God . . . totally . . . completely . . . for each day . . . for each breath . . . in the midst of the good and the bad . . .

A pilgrimage is usually described as a going to a specific place with a specific task in mind. But in a more general way, we have all been invited to follow Jesus on a journey. That journey leads each of us to different places and different forms of service. Daily we are each being asked to step out on faith. Exactly what that means for each of us is different. Perhaps it means allowing God to free us from a destructive habit. Perhaps it means ending an unhealthy relationship. Perhaps it means working to rebuild a rocky marriage. Perhaps it means sharing the good news of Jesus with a struggling friend or neighbor. Perhaps God is asking you to serve in a special ministry either here at church or out in the community.

Jesus once invited Peter to leave the security of a boat and to step out on the water. To Peter's credit he did. Now he did have some problems because he forgot to keep watching Jesus. But he was willing to obey and to step out. Dare we ?

In closing this morning, I want to do two things. First there is a song that become more and more meaningful to me. It's written by Diane Thiel. It is called *If You Say Go*.

After we listen to the song, I would invite you to join me in saying Psalm 121 as an affirmation of our faith.

Listen to song . . .

The Psalms are not meant to be explained as much as they are meant to be experienced. They were the songbook and the prayer book of the believers.

In closing this morning, I would invite you to join me as we affirm our faith by reading this Psalm together.

*¹I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
²My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
From God the awesome Creator.
³He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
⁴He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
⁶The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
⁷The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
⁸The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.*