

SUSTAINED BY SCRIPTURE'S SONG - I LIFT MY EYES UP
A SERMON BASED ON PSALM 121
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2019
10:00 a.m.

There are places we are scared to look.

When we were little, it may have been as simple

as scared to look under the bed, or in the closet

after we'd gone to bed.

It may have been the crawlspace under the house

at Grandma and Grandpas.

Who knew what was under there, in there, waiting for you?

We like to think the 'scared to look' phenomenon is something we outgrow.

But it doesn't really go away.

When the Visa or Mastercard bill comes in the mail,

especially the January one,

we can be scared to take a look.

What is in there waiting for me?

There are those who won't look,

leaving bills unopened in a pile on the desk.

Better not to look.

When someone in the house yells in a panicked voice,

‘the toilet is plugged’

the average person is scared to look,

not only because of having to lay eyes on

whatever caused the toilet to plug,

but also because depending on how fast the water is filling

you could have to watch a messy crisis get messier.

When the mechanic says, let’s just lift the hood and take a look,

When the doctor says, let’s just order some blood work, and scans

and see what we’ve got,

When the accountant says, bring your slips in and see where we’re at.

Well you might be scared to look.

We avert our eyes because of fear of what we’ll see.

What is this going to cost?

What kind of trouble am I in? What is ahead for me?

What is going to happen?

Psalm 121 is one of the better known Psalms in church land.

It is a favourite for many.

It is a favourite of mine.

It starts quite beautifully and simply.

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

I lift up my eyes to the mountains.

Where does my help come from?

The problem is, right off the bat,

We generally mishear this question.

We think it is a comforting question.

We hear, 'lift my eyes to the mountains' and we think

beautiful Rocky Mountain vistas,

inspiring, majestic, breathtaking beauty.

We hear 'lift my eyes to the hills' and we think

gently rolling Tuscan hills in Italy

vineyards and fields of wheat misted in golden evening light

calming, heartening, filling us with peace.

There are places we are not scared to look.

It is easy to lift our eyes up to

beautiful and inspiring and calming.

But those are not the hills, the mountains, of the Judean countryside.

Those are not the hills you walk between on the pilgrimage

to Jerusalem.

In Biblical times,

Three times a year, faithful Hebrews

set out on a journey to Jerusalem.

To the temple.

Think going to see your family at Christmas,

and then again at Easter,

and then for the Thanksgiving weekend,

Or driving to Florida every year for March Break,

or to the cottage in the summer,

to the ski hills in the winter.

The trip to Jerusalem was a familiar family pilgrimage.

As they were able, the Jewish people would head to Jerusalem

For the feast of Passover in the spring,

the feast of Pentecost in the summer,

and the feast of Tabernacles in the fall.

And in the way families sing in the car to make the time go,

or an individual puts a playlist together on their phone

for a long road trip,

on their journey to the temple,

the Jewish people sang as they walked..

In the Bible, the book of Psalms has

The fifteen songs of ascent, the songs of going up,

up to Jerusalem, up to the temple.

They are the songs that are found in Psalm 120 - 134.

The pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a trip

that filled a family with the joy of worship,

a reminder of identity, and story.

passover, pentecost and tabernacle.

Easter, New Year's, Christmas.

To make it to Jerusalem provided both a sense of duty met,
a time out of the ordinary for family,
and the opportunity to remember that God was, and is, and will be
good, gracious and faithful.

But it was also a dangerous journey.

The roads to Jerusalem travelled along valley floors,
through passes in steep hills.

It looks not unlike the drive
from Vegas to the Grand Canyon through the mountains,
dry and steep and a little dangerous.

The Judean hills were the perfect place
for bandits and thieves to hide.

They were the perfect place from which to spring out
and ambush travellers.

They still are.

The hills on the way to Jerusalem,

were the 'late at night' underground parking garage of their day.

These families making pilgrimages were lucrative for bandits.

Laden down with their offering for the temple,

hindered from quick travel

because they had their families with them,

farmers, labourers and merchants didn't have

the protection of traveling with soldiers guarding them,

or the benefit of hiring mercenaries and security detail

the way the wealthy merchants did

to protect their caravans of goods for trade.

The common person, the common family,

was especially vulnerable.

Sitting ducks. Or least slowly waddling ducks that couldn't fly.

They were the tourists in Venice's St. Mark's square,

perfect prey for the pickpockets.

Except this wasn't lifting a wallet.

It would be a full, run down the hill, take everything ambush.

So, when the pilgrims sang this song.

I lift my eyes up to the hills, the feeling was not

Rocky Mountain beauty and the comfort of golden light
on Tuscan hills.

When they lifted their eyes to the hills - what did they see?

They saw the threat of ambush.

They saw their vulnerability.

They saw that at any moment,

from behind any turn in the road,

from behind that concrete post in the parking garage,

from overtop of the next rise,

they could be overrun

and stripped down of everything valuable,

they could be left with nothing,

or worse, be left with bruises, wounds,

and the pervasive fear of ever travelling again.

Worse than being left with nothing,

they could be reduced to nothing.

When they lifted their eyes up to the hills,

they saw threat and danger.

They felt fear, anxiety and uncertainty.

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

It was the feeling that you get when you are going to travel

and someone says,

have you seen the weather forecast?

It was the feeling that you get when you see on the call display

that the doctor has called.

It was the feeling you get when you see the river coming over the banks

in the spring thaw.

I lift my eyes up to the hills.

When they lifted their eyes, they asked a question.

It is the question of the anxious, they fearful and the uncertain.

Where does my help come from?

What will I do? What am I going to do?

When they lifted their eyes to the hills,

they saw not only potential threat.

There was something else up there in the hills.

Where does my help come from?

In the words of author Eugene Peterson,

'During this time...

Palestine was overrun with popular pagan worship.

Much of this religion was practised on hilltops.

Shrines were set up,

groves of trees were planted,

sacred prostitutes, both male and female were provided;

persons were lured to the shrines

to engage in acts of worship

that would enhance the fertility of the land,

that would make you feel good,

that would protect you from evil.

There were medicines, protections, spells,

and enchantments against all the perils of the road.

Did you fear the sun's heat?

Go to the sun priest and pay for protection against the sun god.

Did you fear that malign influence of moonlight that makes you crazy?

Go to the moon priestess and buy an amulet.

I lift my eyes to the hills.

I see danger. I see threat.

I see that it's going to be a challenge to make it.

I see the danger, the risk, I feel the fear,

that I might not make it to Jerusalem, to the temple,

that I might not make it to God.

I lift my eyes to the hills and see threat

But up there in the hills,

I also see altars, and shrines and temples to all kinds of various gods.

I see talismans and temples, plans and strategies all promising to help me.

Where does my help come from?

This journey of life we are travelling very often feels dangerous.

We know we are on a hazardous trip.

We're travelling with, hanging onto, carrying,

treasures and road maps.

Treasures we have worked hard

to gather, sort and pack.

Maps of the path that will get us where we want to go.

The education, that leads to the career, that leads to prosperity.

The hard work, that leads to one's own business,
that leads to security, and self-sufficiency.

Our physical health and appearance,
as we strive to control outcomes, exercising,
reducing carbs, taking vitamins
managing our image, clothes, the things we own
so we can do the things we like to do on the weekend.

We try and map our way to the right relationship,
that leads to family,
that leads to belonging.

We carry these treasures, guard them best we can, following the map that
we think will bring us to a good place at the right pace.

Carrying these treasures, we might be scared to look
at what might be in the hills.
be fearful of what could come at us,
we can live our days feeling fear, anxiety and uncertainty.

We can live our days,
with our ear to the ground,
listening for the hoofbeats of disaster.
with our nose to the wind,
sniffing for the scent of danger.
with our eyes to the hills,
we can spend our days
scanning the vista for the rising dust of the coming army.

We can spend our days,
lifting our eyes up to the hills,
waiting for the ambush.
waiting for the journey to come to a crushing halt,
waiting for it all to be taken from us.

We've seen it happen.

They have come running down the hill to rob us,
or if not us,
our friends.

A change in the economy rushes down the hill,

closes our company,

impoverishes us, leaving us looking for work.

Age and illness plunder us,

making a return to physical ability seem idyllic,

never mind physical perfection.

Unmet expectations weigh upon our relationships,

and they collapse, unable to move forward.

We are scared of ending up pillaged pilgrims.

We lift our eyes to the hills.

Hoping that there are some gods up there who will help us.

Like the prophets of Baal, we dance,

we bow, we plead, and we promise.

Trying to wake the gods.

Trying to get them to show us favour.

We dance. We bow. We plead. We promise.

For the next job which will make me secure.

For the next house which will make me feel successful.

For the next relationship which will make me happy.

We twist and dance before the idols.

I'll change, once I'm out of this mess, I'll change.

I'll take back control of my life.

Next time it's going to be different.

That little extra bit of money will solve my problems.

Lose ten pounds, a few new clothes, a different hair cut,

I'll be a new person.

I'll go to counselling. I'll follow doctor's orders. I'll see the advisor.

I'll get all these people to guard my caravan.

What we have failed to see,

when we lift our eyes to the hills

is that these false gods we dance for

hoping they will make us whole,

are in fact,

the very ones who rushed down the hill to ambush us.

They are the ones who tie us up,

promise if we just listen to them we'll be safe,

and prevent our journey to Jerusalem,

our journey to God.

We lift our eyes to the hills.

But we don't always see it.

We don't see that the very things we are dancing for,
the very things we are carrying, and treasuring,
the very things we are striving for, journeying towards,
the very hills we are climbing,
the very things we think will make us secure and happy,
are the things that ultimately rob us, steal from us, abandon us
and leave us
without peace,
without purpose, without hope, without joy.

We don't always see it.

Sometimes at a funeral we will see it, or hear it.

You can't take it with you.

Cherish each day.

Don't take loved ones for granted.

But most days we don't see it.

So we dance faster, plead louder,

work harder, promise quicker.

We don't know
or we forget,
we don't look to see
where our help comes from.

A man came to Jesus,
at a place in life,
where he was secure enough to ask the big, existential questions.

His bills were paid, his income was secure.

He was not bothered with questions like,

how can I find a job?

or how can I feed my family?

His question was,

Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

It is the gospel of Mark that tells us the man was rich.

It is the gospel of Matthew that tells us he was young.

It is the gospel of Luke that tells us he was a ruler.

The rich, young, ruler.

Money, youth and power.

all of them, gods at the top of the hill.

Jesus said to him,

go, sell all you have, give it to the poor, then come follow me.

I lift my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

Jesus wanted to help the young, wealthy, powerful man.

He wanted to free him from the ambush that would come.

From being attacked on his journey to God,

by these false gods of youth, money and power.

Jesus wanted the man to have eternal life.

He wanted him to be free on his pilgrimage to worship God.

The man couldn't trust Jesus.

I can't let those go teacher.

My help comes from those things.

He went away sad. Robbed of the full life Jesus offered.

Those on their way to Jerusalem,

on their way to worship sing a different song.

It is a song of joy, peace, hope and purpose.

Where does my help come from?

My help comes from the Lord,

who made heaven and earth,

and though my world give way,

becoming an avalanche of rolling stone,

he will not let my foot slip.

He won't have to be awakened.

it is slumbering idols that need you to dance and yell and twist
to be shaken awake.

But God doesn't sleep. God doesn't slumber in his watchcare.

Those on their way to Jerusalem, on their way to worship, sing.

God will keep me.

In case you miss it, this message of God keeping you, is repeated.

In this short song of eight verses, we hear it six times.

God will keep me.

The Lord is my keeper.

He will keep my going out, my coming in.

He will keep me from evil.

The one who keeps me will not slumber.

The Lord is my keeper.

When you lift your eyes up to the hills,

and you see danger, and threat and uncertainty,

where does your help come from?

Your help, it comes, not from the idols up there,

your help come from the Lord.

When you lift your eyes to the hills,

and see danger, and risk and anxiety and threat,

When you lift your eyes to the hills,

and see false gods ready to ambush you on your journey,

When you lift your eyes to the hills,

and you pause to ask, 'Where does my help come from?'

Remember and be reminded.

The Lord is your keeper.

The Lord is your shade at your right hand.

The Lord watches over you.

The Lord will keep you from all harm and preserve your soul.

The Lord will watch over your going out and coming in,

now and forever.

When you lift your eyes up to the hills,

whatever it is you see up there,

whatever it is that you are scared to look at

Remember where your help comes from.

The Lord is your keeper.

Your help comes from the Lord.

Journey in peace.

Amen.