

St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church—Muskego, WI
Sermon of July 1-3, 2006 Treasured Portions of Scripture
Text: Psalm 121

Theme: *Where Does My Help Come From?*

The call came from a young man in the middle of the night, "Pastor, I'm scared. I don't want to live anymore and I'm afraid of what I'm going to do. Please help me." Once it was the voice of a frantic mother, "My daughter was just involved in a serious car accident. Flight for life is taking her in. Please come pray with us." Another time a wife in tears, "My husband is close to death pastor. Could you come?" Another time a concerned and frustrated husband, "Pastor, our marriage isn't doing well at all. Can we talk?"

It comes with the profession. Like police officers or medical workers, a pastor walks with people during some of the most difficult crises in their journey through life.

No doubt, that is part of the reason I have fallen in love with 121st Psalm. If I have visited you during a crisis times in life, there's a good chance I shared these powerful verses with you. This psalm is one of the songs of ascent, about a dozen psalms that were sung as God's Old Testament pilgrims made their way up to Jerusalem to worship and offer their sacrifices.

Now, when we go to church, it's just a matter of jumping in the car and we're there in a couple of minutes, some of us a little longer. But when God's Old Testament people went to church, we're talking about a couple of days walk, maybe more. We're talking about sleeping outside along the road. We're talking about a lot of hot sun during the day, the threat of wild animals at night. Often thugs would hide alongside the road, beat up and rob travelers as they made their way. Going to church was downright dangerous.

Take a moment to imagine yourself walking along a path with hills all around you. You're heading up to Jerusalem. All these potential dangers weigh on your mind. Imagine the comfort of singing this song along the way:

"I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? ² My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. ³ He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; ⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵ The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand; ⁶ the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷ The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; ⁸ the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore."

We don't have to imagine. You and I are on that journey. It's the journey of life, the journey to the New Jerusalem we call heaven—a journey with all sorts of unknowns around the bend and dangers along the way. Some of you have already been through dark valleys. Some of you are going through them now. Others will be facing them soon. It's part of life in a fallen world. Yet, by God's grace, as we make our journey, we have the same comfort that those pilgrims had—the comfort of knowing where our help comes from.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from?" What was going through his mind when the psalmist lifted his eyes to the hills? The mountains make me think of strength and security. Was that what the psalmist had in mind? In those days the hills, or the high places, were often home to the Asherah poles and Baal worship, the stronghold of idolatry in Israel. Is this first verse a warning to make sure we're looking for help in the right place?

Where do you look for help in times of trouble? Our first thought is God, of course. But is that the reality? When you're going through a lot of stress, when you're having a bad day, do you spend time in prayer? Or do you find yourself mixing a drink or reaching into the fridge for a bottle of beer? Is that your great stress reliever? Do spend a few hours in front of the television, living in a world of fantasy, escaping it all? Perhaps it's video games or elicited pictures on the internet that have become your "drug." Maybe it is drugs.

Are you someone who feels at ease only when there's plenty of money in the bank account? You save every dollar because it's going to be there to help you when you need it. It's going to take care of you in your old age. It's going to get you the medical help you need. It's going to give you and your children everything you want in life.

Maybe you feel you'll be okay if you just keep yourself informed. If you just learn how to eat healthy, how to take care of yourself, what vitamins and supplements to take, what kind of exercise you need, then you'll

be okay. Maybe you feel you'll be okay if you just organize your life better, make a list and do it. Maybe, if you could just find the best doctor, or a better job, or the right house, or a husband...or whatever.

We have innate need for security and a nature that looks for it in whatever we can see, feel and touch. These things make us feel better. But they're only temporary remedies. They help us survive another day or get through another week. Sooner or later we're going to realize that all our planning and relaxation and entertainments doesn't remove the mountain of responsibilities we face, doesn't really prepare us for death and eternity. God expects us to be patient, kind, forgiving, and generous—at all times! We all have a mountain of “shoulds” and expectations and failures that isn't wiped away by watching a funny movie. That mountain can't be removed even with the most detailed schedule.

“Our help comes from the LORD”—“LORD” in all capital letters. This is the Savior God, the God who, when Adam and Eve trusted the words of Satan over the Word of God, was right there with a promise of help and hope. This is the LORD of love who went to the cross to pay the price for all the times we are blinded by our sinful nature and put our trust in idols rather than him. This is the God who gives us real help and real answers as we feel crushed under that mountain of “shoulds” and expectations and failures, as we face the realities of death and the question of where we are going to spend eternity. That real help is forgiveness and unconditional love in Jesus.

“Our help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.” Our help comes from the one who created this world and everything in it, including us. He knows and understands us. He knows how we're wired, what our needs are, how sin has messed us up and what the real remedy is.

Back in the early 1900's a company purchased a newly invented machine. After a short time, the machine broke down. Engineers from the company couldn't figure out what was wrong. Finally they called in the inventor. He tinkered on it for a couple minutes, turned to the owner and said, “Your problem is solved.” Then he handed him a bill for \$100. Now remember this was over 100 years ago. \$100 was a lot of money. The owner exclaimed, “\$100! You only tinkered around for a few minutes.” The inventor replied, “\$10 for tinkering and \$90 for knowing where to tinker.”

Our help comes from our inventor, the Maker of heaven and earth. Do you know what that means? There is no situation in life, no difficulty, no trouble that we can find ourselves in that God doesn't know the solution to long before we even see it coming. Why look anywhere else?

The LORD is the God who **“will not let your foot slip.”** There were loose rocks and potholes on the paths up to Jerusalem. If you slipped and twisted an ankle, you were in bad shape. Not too many walk-clinics along the way.

We really don't know, do we, how many troubles the Lord has kept us from throughout our lives? Psalm 91 says, **“No harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent” (verse 10).** How many accidents have we narrowly escaped because the Lord kept us from harm? Twice already in my life I've been driving down the highway, when suddenly the semi coming toward me started veering into my lane. There's nowhere else to go. And what a way to go—packed in a can like a sardine. Both times, however, at the very last moment the truck veered back into its lane. Was that an angel alongside the driver, tapping him on the shoulder? Our help comes from the LORD!

“He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel with neither slumber nor sleep.” I once heard a tragic story about a child who took off from his mother and ran into busy street. He was killed. The mother said, “I only turned my head for a second.” Boy, it's frightening to think of what can happen if we lose focus even for a just a moment.

God doesn't ever lose his focus. Think about that! There's not a moment when we're out of God's sight. There are times in life when we may feel that we're very much alone. But God is there. The psalmist says that **“the LORD is your shade at your right hand.”** Like our shadow, the Lord never leaves us.

The American Indians had a unique practice of training young braves. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, after learning hunting, scouting, fishing, etc., he was put to one final test. He was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Until then, he had never been away from the security of the family and the tribe. But on this night, he was blindfolded and taken several miles away. When he took off the blindfold, all was black. You can imagine, every time a twig snapped, he visualized a wild animal ready to pounce.

It was an eternal night. But when dawn broke and the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest, the boy began to see flowers, trees, the outline of the path, and, to his great surprise, a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was his father. He had been there the whole time. In the same

way, your heavenly Father is always watching over you, sun and moon, day and night. Our help comes from the LORD!

“The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life.” We might struggle with the statement *“the LORD will keep you from all harm.”* Especially when we’re in the midst of a difficult and painful situation. This hurts, LORD, how can you say that you will keep me from all harm? We wonder if God is mistaken.

Like the maternity shop that once received this note in the mail: “Dear Sirs, you have not yet delivered that maternity dress I ordered. Please cancel the order. MY DELIVERY WAS FASTER THAN YOURS.” Sometimes babies come sooner than expected. Doctors can set the date, but God ordains the date! Doctors are human. Doctors make mistakes. But God never makes a mistake.

The pain in your life is not a mistake. The LORD has a bigger goal in mind. He’s looking to the final destination. His desire is to keep your faith strong. Your faith alone will bring you safely to heaven. It’s gold as far as God is concerned. And the LORD knows what road—bumpy, hilly, straight, or winding—that will bring us safely there. Our help comes from the LORD!

“The LORD will watch over your coming and your going both now and forevermore.” These words have been used at times in the baptism service. Think of how perfectly they apply! At our baptism God comes to us and says, *“You are my child. I am your Father. I have brought you into my family. I will watch over you as you grow and journey through life. I will be there to carry you through the difficult times and to strengthen you for the journey. My goal is to bring you safely home. I will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.”*

That’s God’s promise to you. May it be an incredible comfort to you wherever your life’s journey may lead! Amen.

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