

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 6, 2023

If you're joining us for the first time this summer, first of all we've missed you, but we hope that you've been joining virtually as you've been traveling. Lots of folks have been, which has been wonderful. Hopefully you're aware by now, because it's our last week, that we've been working through a series called Psalms of Summertime. As Jeanene just told our kids, we are focusing on what we know as a Pilgrimage Psalm this morning—Psalm 121. I'm going to read it in just a moment, so I'd invite you to go ahead and grab your Pew Bible or your Bible if you brought it with you this morning and turn to Psalm 121. Before we read it together, let us go to God in prayer.

Good and gracious Spirit, fall fresh upon us. Move amongst us and within us as you moved across the waters of creation. Draw forth from us new life. May your word instruct us, encourage us, may it convict us and may it compel us in the ways that we live our lives. We ask it in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus the Christ. And all God's people say together—Amen.

Psalm 121 beginning in the first verse.

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved;
He who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So Jeanene was asking our little ones how they got here, and every one of them seemed like they drove here or had their parents drive them to this place of course.

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I was thinking a lot about road trips this week as I prepared to preach this morning. Each summer as a child my family would make the drive from Charlotte, North Carolina, where I was born and spent the first six years of my life, or Greenville, South Carolina, where I spent my adolescence. We would drive from wherever that was, wherever home was, up to the beaches of Delaware—Bethany Beach, Delaware. We'd spend time with family there reconnecting. We'd also make another beach trip down to the coast of South Carolina, where everyone would come together and spend a week together. Maybe y'all remember those sorts of family vacations as a child. The one I remember most was the one that we took in my mom's 1984 Plymouth Station Wagon. It was this beautiful khaki color. It was as ugly as you might imagine it could possibly be. It was a boxy thing, but it got us from point A to point B. I remember I was five years old when we made the trip to Litchfield Beach, South Carolina. I remember because I had just been given a California Raisin—do y'all remember those? yeah—and they would attach with suction cups to the...the windows, and I would wave at every single person that we were passing and point to my little friend that was stuck to the window. And every time we went somewhere—it was either a tape or the radio—my mom would get to pick the music. I remember Michael McDonald and Kenny Loggins and Toto. I remember singing Louie Louie at the top of our lungs and listening to The Beatles, who at that time I really disliked, but I've grown to love. Our road trips were marked by stops at rest areas for stretching of legs and also by singing together as a family. Maybe you have a memory of your family singing together, or maybe you've seen that in some memory on television or in a movie. When we would ride together, those songs would, as Janine kind of shaped with our children there, some would encourage us. They were meant to make us feel good about the trek that we were on. So now when I hear Yacht Rock as it is known, anything by the Doobie Brothers or Michael McDonald or Kenny Loggins or anybody else, when I hear songs from that genre, they take me back to that journey, those journeys that we took as a family. There was a song that my mom loved, and you all probably know the refrain. It spoke about the Boys of Summer, and uh...and it always for me, uh, brought about this melancholy feeling because summer was coming to an end. I heard that song this week, and it took me back to being in Greenville and riding around together.

I say all that to say that this psalm, Psalm 121, is one of 15 psalms that are Psalms of Pilgrimage. I actually didn't know what a Psalm of Pilgrimage was until this summer. It wasn't originally a part of our summer series, but our esteemed Right Reverend Mary Newberg Gail introduced it to me and to us in our teaching earlier on this summer, and so we added it in and it seems really important. These are 15 psalms that are relatively short in nature. They're songs that you could commit to memory if you wanted to. And they are songs that the Jewish people would sing and speak aloud to each other when they were journeying together, particularly when they were going to one of the festivals in Jerusalem. So there were a number of times each liturgical year when the people would have to make their way to that holy place, and as they made their way to that place, they would sing these songs over and over and over again. And we imagine that would be a fun journey, but it actually had some danger to it. I have for my entire life read the first verse of Psalm 121 as if it was this humbling, as if it was a humbling phrase or word. When the psalmist says, "I lift up my eyes to the hills," I imagine someone gazing off into the wilderness and seeing the beauty of the mountains and imagining the journey ahead, but it turns

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out that that is uh not the right place for us to start. It turns out when the psalmist peers off to the hills, fixes their eyes upon the hills, what they are actually looking at is a difficult journey that lies ahead. The mountains don't represent, necessarily, only the beauty of God's creation. Actually more than that what they represent is threat and difficulty. The mountains represent that which will make the journey difficult for the people of God. In the mountains there were thieves. In the mountains there were unfriendly animals. In the mountains you would run across weather that could put you in peril. When the psalmist lifts their eyes to the hills, what they are lifting their eyes to is the difficulty that lies just before them.

And so they need to sing a song to will themselves forward.

Peering at that danger they ask, "Where will my help come from?"

And then, not individually, but as a community, as if in an old station wagon or in a caravan making their way to their destination, they sing together. "My help comes from the Lord who made Heaven and Earth."

That Lord will not let my foot be moved. That Lord will keep me as I sleep. The same Lord that created those mountains created me too and all of my people. That Lord will not slumber nor sleep. That Lord will be my keeper. That Lord will be the shade at my right hand so that the sun might not strike me by day nor the moon by night. That Lord will keep me from all evil. That Lord will keep my life.

That Lord will keep my going out and my coming in, not just now but forever. The pilgrims needed music to encourage them forward when they could see the danger that lay ahead of them.

It's interesting. These ancient people in whose footsteps we follow, they were probably not the first to need music to propel them forward, but they set for us an example of what needs to happen, and often society brings about, when there are dangers that lie ahead.

We could easily imagine together communal dangers that lie ahead for us even here and now, but if we were to take ourselves back as our adult forum invited us to this morning, if we were to take ourselves back to the Civil Rights Movement. If we were to take ourselves back to that place, we would recognize that there were anthems that were sung and repeated that inspired the people forward towards more justice, more equality, more equity.

So when you hear Sam Cooke...you hear him sing A Change is Going to Come, when you hear We Shall Overcome, when you hear Blowing in the Wind, when you hear Freedom Highway or People Get Ready, maybe it takes you back to a time when the people saw great danger lying before them, and they needed melodies to encourage them to walk forward and not just any kind of melodies, but melodies of hope and of promise and of protection, melodies that would remind them that there was something beyond those mountains that was good and faithful, not just for them but for all humanity. If you were to fast forward a few more years, you might hear Bob

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Marley's Redemption Song or Public Enemy's Fight the Power or Kendrick Lamar's Alright, and you would hear them as more contemporary psalms of pilgrimage towards justice.

The people of Israel needed to be encouraged by the Psalms, and so do we, it turns out.

There are many mountains that lie before us, much undone work that needs to be taken on by the church when it is related to anti-racism work, related to equity around gender and inclusion, much work for us to do. And we will need the collective hope of our community to propel us forward. We will need to sing songs that remind us that there is a God beyond the mountains that will protect us when the sun is shining bright and when the moon is out, that won't let our feet be moved. That God which the psalmist sometimes asks to stop sleeping and to wake up, that God actually never sleeps.

There are certainly communal mountains that we have to cross, but there's also personal. What I realized this week is that each of us is the psalmist as well. We lift our eyes to the hills, that difficult thing before us, even dangerous thing that looms in our distance. Maybe it's in our work, maybe it's at school, maybe it's amongst classmates or co-workers, maybe that mountain represents something going on in our families, maybe it represents separation or divorce, maybe it represents care for our aging parents, maybe it represents parenting our children in a particularly difficult season. That mountain can be any sort of thing for us. It might be your health, it might be your faith. It's whatever it is that is dangerous and just beyond the distance, and you look to it and you say, "Where is my help going to come from?"

The psalmist says that there is a Lord, a Lord who goes before us, a Lord that walks with us, that is ever present to us, that is our keeper.

The Lord is going to keep us as we go towards that mountain.

This summer we spent nine weeks reflecting together on the Psalms of Summertime. We did so because we believe that the Psalms speak to the deeply human experience of this life. We began with Psalm 1 and then Psalm 150. Those were psalms of praise for us.

We moved to a psalm which was a hymn, Psalm 145, and then a royal psalm, Psalm 97, then one of personal and communal lament, 13 and 44 respectively, then a psalm of thanksgiving, 103, a psalm of wisdom, 119, and then we finished this morning with Psalm 121. Here's the thing—

I don't know what mountain lies in your distance. Maybe it is age, maybe it is health, maybe it is something to do with a relationship, maybe you can fill in the blank; but what I do know and what the psalmist knew, and what the people of Israel knew was that God is with you on the journey authoring this pilgrimage. God is your shade in the sun, your protector at your right hand.

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So I hope that we might together be encouraged. Whatever it is that we are having to navigate, there is a God that loves us, cares for us, and is drawing us forward even into that difficult thing.

I found solace in that this week, thinking about those journeys that I took as a child. Maybe you can go back there in your mind too.

I found solace in the fact that that God has been with each and every pilgrim for all of creation, that same God is with you this morning. So here's my hope. My hope is that you might have now at the completion of this series a playlist of sorts. Maybe it's these 15 Psalms of Pilgrimage or maybe it is the ones that we've spent the entire summer reflecting upon. I hope that you'll come back to them, that you'll maybe even commit them to memory, that in them you will see how deeply human the psalmist's words are, how they draw forth from us our most difficult moments and our most joyful. And I hope that we might be inspired to live more fully as the psalmist calls us to.

I invite you to join me in a word of prayer this morning.

Lord, we look up and there's a mountain in front of us,
and while we might be in awe of it, we also know that it holds for us dangerous things.
Perhaps it's not thieves, perhaps it's not inclement weather, but the dangers are just as real,
and so we call upon the words of the psalmist to...to surround us this morning.
May we be reminded that you are with us on this journey,
that you are not just with each of us personally, but you are with us in community together.
So inspire us to walk more courageously towards those mountains in the distance.
Remind us that you are with us. Remind us that you love us. Remind us that you care for us. For
we ask it in the name of Jesus the Christ, the one who sojourns with us and for us.

And all God's people say together, Amen.