

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP: SUMMER IN THE PSALMS

Lift Up Your Eyes

Psalm 121

July 12, 2026

"Summer in the Psalms." At the beginning of this sermon series, Rev. Chris Henry encouraged us to claim these prayers within the Bible as our prayers, and to consider writing down or memorizing a few lines that might become roots, a way of planting ourselves near living water in the ordinary rhythms of our days. It is not too late to accept that invitation, and today's reading of Psalm 121 is a perfect opportunity to do so.

"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."

Simple words. Powerful truth. Deep roots.

This 'song of ascent' was sung centuries ago by pilgrims as they began a journey up to Jerusalem, up to the Temple. And it has been used by people of faith throughout the centuries on journeys of all kinds. I know of a family who will read this psalm anytime they leave for a road trip. Jewish families sometimes display Psalm 121 in the delivery room or in a young child's bedroom.

Our lives are filled with journeys, with comings and goings, and this psalm gives us the language to call on God's protection and care.

I remember it like it was yesterday: Melrose, Scotland. I was with two dear friends and traveling companions as we embarked on a pilgrimage of our own. It was all planned out: we'd be walking about 60 miles over the course of 5 days. Our bags were packed, our hiking boots were laced, our poles extended and at the ready, nothing left but to take the first step—or *climb* the first step, rather. As we lifted our eyes to the beginning of our journey, we were met with a winding series of narrow

steps that climbed up, and up, and up—and beyond that, towering hills. Melrose was in a valley, and the only way out was up.

I lifted my eyes to the hills—and I would love to be able to tell you that the words of Psalm 121 instinctively flowed through my heart and across my lips. That's not what happened. It was something much more...*colorful*, let's say, that shall not be repeated from this pulpit.

And then we began to climb.

I really could have used these words as I hovered on the cusp of that first step, wondering, *can I do this? Will we make it? What might go wrong on the way?*

For the ancient Israelites journeying to Jerusalem, the answer to that question—*what might go wrong on the way?*—was "a lot." Depending on the starting point, the journey to Jerusalem took as many as several *days* on foot through rugged terrain. Hebrew Bible scholar Bobby Morris reminds us that "travel for the ancients was at best difficult and commonly dangerous. The availability of water would have been a constant concern, especially in the hot dry summers when the sun mercilessly beats down...and the danger of bandits could never be ruled out, as the parable of the good Samaritan later bears witness."

Physical exertion and exhaustion...a limited and shifting food and water supply...uncertainty around braving the elements and finding adequate shelter...We lose some of this context in our world today. For many of us at the start of a journey, our worries are not as fundamental as *will we be able to find water? or how will we protect ourselves from wild animals?* (When my husband and I drove to southern Indiana earlier this summer to drop our kids

off for a week at camp, we borrowed my father-in-law's electric vehicle for the drive and our biggest worry was finding a place to charge the car on the way back!)

The psalmist could have never imagined a world with electric vehicles, but the truth in this psalm is deeper than these differences of context. Our lives are filled with journeys. Sometimes of the miles—an exciting road trip or an ambitious hike. We go through major life transitions: graduations and first jobs, new opportunities and perhaps a sudden job loss or a change of circumstances. We go on journeys of relationship and belonging, navigating closeness and distance within marriage or as a sibling, child, or parent. Many of you have been on journeys of infertility, cancer, or chronic illness—you're not bracing for bandits and wild animals but for scans and test results. We embark on journeys of understanding, struggling to bridge the distance between ourselves and those who lives and viewpoints seem worlds away.

Sometimes the challenges we encounter are expected. And then there are the surprises. Hiking up and out of Melrose, I was so daunted by the enormity of those hills. My heartrate was elevated and I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach—there were the hills that I could see, but *what about those that I couldn't yet see? How many more were lurking in the distance?* Of course, what goes up must come down, and I was humbled to quickly learn that I had been fearing the wrong thing all along. Uphill was hard, but it was the downhill that wreaked havoc on my knees. In a strange way, I began to enjoy the predictable challenge of climbing up – and was much more cautious, and much less cavalier, about going down.

I wonder what journey you are on now, or what journey you might be preparing to begin? What journeys have you eagerly embraced? What hills have you encountered? Where have you been humbled or gained wisdom? What roads have you traveled that you never would have willingly walked down?

This psalm makes that powerful claim that whenever we face a journey, whenever we lift our eyes and ask, “where will my help come from?”—the answer is as

close as our next breath: “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

The rest of the psalm is both a blessing and a vivid portrayal of just who this God is.

The Lord is your keeper: the One who safeguards, protects, and provides. Near and vigilant enough to steady our steps; faithful and powerful enough to keep watch in the night without rest. A divine presence, not far away but right at your side, providing shade from the elements. The relief that we feel in stepping out of the sun's rays on a blazing hot day—that's what God's shelter feels like! God's care extends from the tips of our toes, across the surface of our skin, and by the end of the psalm, encompasses the whole of our lives. “The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.”

This is good news for anyone starting or on the midst of a journey, whether a journey of the miles, of the body, or the head or the heart.

But there is a danger here. I'd be willing to bet that a number of you have sprained an ankle before. I'm certain that many of us have been sunburned more times than we can count. If we turn the poetic language of this prayer into a literal guarantee against all harm, we will end up disappointed, and even worse, we'll miss the point. This psalm isn't meant to give us illusions of invincibility, but rather to tell us who God is. In our human experience, we know that the character of a parent is to protect and care for their child. That is who a parent is. When a child scrapes their knee, which they inevitably will, and worse—that doesn't diminish the identity of the parent. The parent is one who loves and protects.

It's an imperfect metaphor, to be sure. We must be very careful about comparing our imperfect human love and action to the enormous and unfathomable love and character of God. But I don't think that the psalmist means to deceive us and say that we will never suffer. The psalmist means to encourage us, assuring us that when we are in need of help, the same God who made the heavens and the earth is at our side, and will never leave or forsake us.

The deep truth of this psalm is never more apparent to me than when I'm at the bedside of someone who is dying. These are often the words that I reach for. And it is in these hard and holy moments when all is decidedly *not well*, when the most unfathomable journey of all looms near, that the words of Psalm 121 ring deep and true:

"God will not let your foot be moved.
The one who keeps you will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand...
The Lord will keep you from all evil...
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore."

In these hard and holy moments our vision becomes clear: This psalm was never about our bodily security, or our changing aches and pains. It's about the God to whom we belong in life and in death, who accompanies us on each and every journey.

This God spoke through the prophet Isaiah: "When you pass through the waters—I will be with you."

Of this God, the psalmist prayed: "If I go to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."

Jesus, speaking of his own death on the cross, said to his friends and followers, "I am leaving you...But I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

In Jesus Christ, the Lord who made heaven and earth *lived and walked among us*, and died and rose again—so that where he is, there we may be also.

Yes, God is our help! The invitation here is not to see our lives as supernaturally shielded, but as securely held in God's care—on the small and ordinary journeys, the long and challenging, the surprising and delightful—and on the grand journey that encompasses the whole of our lives. "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."

God is our help.

One of the gifts of this psalm is that when we find ourselves taking in the hills and grasping for help—it reminds us where to look. A couple of Sundays ago, Rev. Audrey Thorne invited us to think of God's presence as a candle in the corner of the room—always there, and yet something that goes in and out of our awareness. Something that we would do well to remember and to notice.

"From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord."

There it is! The candle. Perhaps this is why the psalmist asks and answers his own question. It's not that he didn't know the answer; he needed to remember it, to rehearse it, to speak it out loud as a source of courage and inspiration for the journey ahead.

When we remember that God is our help, we are more likely to call upon the resources and commitments of our faith when faced with difficult journeys or situations.

Imagine: I'm faced with a complex ethical dilemma... "my help comes from the Lord!" What would it look like to be guided by the justice and compassion of Jesus in this situation?

Imagine, I'm making decisions about how to use my time and resources..."my help comes from the Lord!" How do I faithfully use these gifts for the good of God's kingdom?

Imagine, my health and abilities are changing..."My help comes from the Lord!" How can I see even this part of my life's journey as held in God's care?

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

So take this prayer. Claim it as your own. Use these words to call upon what you already know to be true—and be strengthened and encouraged for whatever the road ahead might bring.

Friends, lift up your eyes. Remember. And walk. Amen.