

Service Date—January 3, 2021  
Sermon Text—Psalm 121

It has been a while now since we closed out the year, but do you remember the headlines and comments? Some I remember said: “Good riddance to a bad year.” “This past year was close to a disaster.” “You were a rotten year. No one likes you. Go away.” Others were along these lines: “I’m looking forward to next year because it can’t get much worse.” You can understand why people felt that way, after all, the year was marked by a financial crisis, millions of people lost their jobs, and a contentious presidential election divided the country. No wonder so many people were looking ahead to...2009. That’s right. The headlines I quoted weren’t from newspapers and stories from a couple of days ago, they were from newspapers and stories as the year 2008 came to a close. And by the way, the year 2009 had some problems of its own. In April of the year a novel virus appeared sickening millions and leading the World Health Organization to declare that infections of the H1N1 virus, also known as the swine flu had reached pandemic levels. Here in this country 60 million people were infected, 12,000 died and nearly 1,200 of those who died were children. So what’s the message? Don’t look ahead to the New Year? Be a pessimist? No. Go ahead and look ahead to the new year, but don’t expect that everything will be wonderful just because you have a new calendar hanging on the wall. Instead let’s look ahead to the New Year with the writer of Psalm 121. That’s what he is doing when he says: “I lift up my eyes to the mountains.” He is looking ahead. As we “Lift Up Our Eyes To The Mountains,” we will get perhaps a bit more realistic view of the New Year because we will see a perilous road ahead, but we will also see our glorious Lord above.

#### I. Lift Up Your Eyes To The Mountains, see the perilous road ahead

Our Psalm is the second of the 15 so-called Psalms or Songs of Ascent which run consecutively from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134 in the hymn book of Israel. There are a variety of explanations given for that title, some, including Martin Luther, understood the title to mean that the Psalm was sung by a choir in a loft or elevated platform. Others understood the idea of ascent to mean that the thoughts ascend or advance like rungs on a ladder throughout the course of the Psalm. Others, and this seems most likely explain the ascent to be the going up of God’s people to worship at the temple of God in Jerusalem. One translation even translates “Songs of Ascent” as “Songs for going up to worship.” Remember that because Jerusalem was built on high ground and the temple itself stood on Mt. Zion, the Jews always talked about going up to Jerusalem. And since the Law of Moses required Israelite men to come to Jerusalem three times a year for the great festivals of Israel’s faith, the people were well acquainted with the journey. Our psalm is sometimes called the “Traveler’s Psalm.”

We think about how the boy Jesus made the journey with his family to celebrate the Passover when he was twelve years old. We know that it was a journey made with family and so it was a time of joy and renewing acquaintances and talking with relatives, but it was also a hard journey. The land of Israel is rugged with mountains and valleys, it is rocky terrain and it was for the most part traveled by foot. If you have ever done any hiking or climbing of mountains in our national parks or even in the Black Hills, you can relate to the thoughts of the Psalm writer as he contemplates his journey saying: “I lift up my eyes to the hills.” Maybe the writer couldn’t even see the hills of Jerusalem with his eyes, but he could envision them in his mind and as he prepared to make the journey and contemplated those hills he breaks off his thought to ask: “Where does my help come from?” Maybe the journey had already begun and the mountains of Jerusalem loomed

before him—close enough to see and yet still so far away, the writer looks where he is, looks at his destination; he pauses and asks: “Where does my help come from?”

It was a hard journey. The weather could be terribly hot; it could be rainy and cold. There would be long downhill stretches that punished the leg muscles and steep uphill sections that made the muscles ache and lungs burn. The trails could be dangerous. We know from Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan that travel through the hills of Israel could be dangerous not only because of loose rocks and uncertain footing, but because of bandits and thieves. Add a pack carrying a few supplies and that extra burden made the journey even more difficult. Perhaps the traveler was no longer so young and wondered if he had the strength to make the climb. As he lifted his eyes to the hills and looked at the journey ahead, he asked: “Where does my help come from?”

Perhaps that’s the way you are looking at the New Year. Yes, for some closing out 2020 brings a sense of relief, the feeling as many have put it after contemplating the pandemic and economic havoc that made news in 2020: “It can’t get much worse.” But those who know history with its world wars and depressions and plagues know that it could get much worse. We would be foolish to think that pulling off a calendar page means that even God’s people will no longer have trouble in this world or that we no longer need to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of heaven. You know as well as I do, that while the new year may be very different than the year we just left much will stay the same. As our journey through this world of sin continues it will again be a perilous journey. We lift up our eyes to the goal of our journey to our final destination and see the home our Lord prepared for us in heaven. That journey will continue for many with the same concerns about physical health and financial wealth and family relations. Chronic pain, the demands on around the clock care-givers, financial insecurity, family difficulty don’t pay attention to calendars pictures. For some the journey in the new year will be made carrying a heavy burden of loss or loneliness and a sense of abandonment. The way will seem to be unrelentingly uphill with little relief from the pressure and pain. And in all of those challenges the devil will be working to shake your faith in God and his love. You may be looking at the journey and asking: “Where does my help come from?”

On the other hand, things may be going well in your family, with your finances and your health; that does not mean the journey will be easy. Just as the pilgrim to Jerusalem had to be alert for bandits and thieves, so we know that we walk in danger all the way to the heavenly Mt. Zion. We can be sure that the New Year will find Satan making new assaults on our faith. He will seek to shake our confidence in Holy Scripture and its truth, in the fact that there is only one true God and only one Savior of sinners. The tempter will line our course with the temptations of the world, its fleeting pleasures and shimmering treasures, he will seek to stir up the sinful nature in us to rebellion against God and continue to try to overthrow our faith and rob us of salvation. He will point you to the advances of science and largesse of government and ask you why anyone really needs God anymore. Some will make the journey with a heavy burden of guilt and shame over past sins, sins that continue to haunt and the effects of which still hurt. If you think the journey will be easy then be careful that you don’t fall for Satan walks about as a roaring lion seeking souls to devour. As you look ahead to the new year, as so many are doing this year with unbridled optimism, perhaps our psalm’s dose of realism has you contemplating the grueling journey and asking: “Where does my help come from?” and our psalm provides the answer as again it encourages us to look to the hills, and see not only a grueling journey, but we also see our glorious Lord above.

## II. Lift Up Your Eyes To The Mountains, See your glorious Lord above

Listen again to our Psalm. The writer contemplates his journey seeing the hills of Jerusalem in the distance, he says: "I lift up my eyes to the hills." He knows it is a hard journey that lies ahead of him, and asks: "Where does my help come from?" And then he supplies the answer to his question: "My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." What reminded him that in his weakness he had a strong helper, what renewed his hope and confidence as he contemplated his journey? It was his look to the hills, to the mountains. As he looks to those strong hills and mountains that stood so firm and immovable he remembered who made them. He knew the words of Scripture from Psalm 90: "Lord you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." It's like the poet wrote as he also contemplated the mountains out his windows and wrote: "As I stared at those big mountains, trees and flowers everywhere; from my heart there welled up praise, because my Lord had put them there. Now I'm not fretting any longer for there's one thing that I see, since my good Lord made those mountains, he can sure take care of me."

And now he just can't wait to share his insights with his fellow travelers. Notice how the pronouns change in our Psalm, from "I" as the writer contemplates his hard journey, to "you" as he tells us what he has learned. Maybe he's just having an internal discussion. But maybe he wants you to know what he has learned: that as he makes his hard journey he does not go alone. He knows the glorious God who made the mountains is with him and with us to watch over us. You can't tell it from our translation but in the last 6 verses of this Psalm the same Hebrew word appears six times. That word is *shamar*, which means to watch over, guard or keep with great care. Don't forget to notice who is watching over you on your journey through this life to eternal life in heaven: it is "the LORD." Five times in this short psalm that divine name appears. "The LORD" watches over us – the gracious and compassionate God, who is slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness, who maintains love to thousands and forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin.

And he explains what it means that the Lord watches over us with great care. He says: "He will not let your foot slip, he who watches over you will not slumber, indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." You hear about a foot slipping and you think about an accident happening. The traveler on the narrow path loses his footing and slips; it can be dangerous, accidents can happen. But not for God's people. Yes, from our point of view there are accidents; sudden, unexpected events that can hurt or injure or kill, but not from God's perspective. Nothing that happens in the lives of God's people happens by accident or chance. God who numbers the hairs of our heads, who does not forget a sparrow, who brings out the starry host and calls them each by name does not fall asleep, he does not take power naps so something can happen that takes him by surprise. Psalm 91 reminded us that God's mighty angels watch over his people on their journey heavenward. Since that is true, and those angels do God's bidding and obey his commands, we can be sure that nothing that hurts can possibly happen to us unless the Lord allows it to happen and has already determined to bring a blessing out of it. The Lord will watch over you every second of your journey; he will be there *whenever* it is.

The Psalmist continues: "The Lord watches over you, the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night." Of the many dangers that faced the traveler in Israel was the sun, if you've been to one of those countries in the Mediterranean area you

know that heat is a very real danger—shade is precious, it protects from the burning, scorching sun. The Lord will be there to protect from danger by day and at night. The moon will not harm you by night. How might the moon harm a traveler? Perhaps by providing light to help those who would harm the traveler carry out an attack at night when the traveler was asleep. In any case we know that God created the sun to rule the day and the moon to rule the night. The sun and the moon are the most powerful forces of night and day, the psalm writer assures us that not the most powerful enemies that threaten by day or night can harm God's people. The Lord will keep you from harm *whatever* you face.

“The Lord will keep you from all harm; he will keep you from all harm. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.” That means the Lord watches over you *wherever* you may be. Remember the songs of ascents and that idea about an ascending set of thoughts in the Psalm? We have reached the pinnacle here, right?” The Lord will keep you from all harm. But you can look back and see in past years, maybe the past year, where things happened that did hurt, so how can the Psalmist make this promise? Because he knows the same God Joseph knew in Egypt. And though much had happened to him from his brothers, slavery in Potiphar's house, slander from Potiphar's wife, the damp cold prison, yet looking back he could say to his brothers: “You intended to harm, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” He knew the God Paul proclaimed who “in all things works for the good of those who love him.” He knew the God Solomon talked about in Ecclesiastes 3 who “makes everything beautiful in its time.” Or Hosea spoke of in his prophecy, “who turns the Valley of Achor (or trouble) into a Door of Hope.” He knew the God Jesus knew when he assured his disciples: “Your names are written in heaven. Don't be afraid. Nothing will harm you.” The Lord watches over your coming and going both now and forevermore. The Lord will watch over you *wherever* you go.

But you say, how can I, a sinful human being be sure that the Lord God who made heaven and earth, who lifted up the mountains and the hills will truly watch over me with care all the days of my life? I only have to look back to last year and my fears, my worries, my grumbling and complaining, and I have to wonder: Will a holy God care about me and for me in the New Year? Remember the words of the psalm: “Our help comes from the LORD.” Not so long ago we were in the season of Advent and preparing for the coming of a Savior, a brother, a helper, sent by a God of love to be the Savior of his people. God sent that Savior. We are still in the Christmas season and remembering the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor so that we through his poverty might become rich. Remember that this is a song of one going up to worship in Jerusalem. On that hill was the house of God where stood the altar of burnt offering. There the blood of animals was used to make atonement for sin day after day and year after year, pointing God's people ahead to the one perfect lamb who on a hill not far away called Calvary would offer himself once for all for the sins of the world. By that sacrifice God's anger is appeased and our ransom is paid. God, who watched over our coming into this world and adopted us as his own through Holy Baptism, will watch over us all the days of our life and when our last hour comes he will watch over our going too. When our hard journey in this world is over his angels will bring us to the heavenly Jerusalem where we will live in his glory forevermore.

So go ahead, do what so many are doing. Look ahead to the New Year; look to the future. Lift your eyes to the hills, see the perilous journey that lies ahead of you, but see your glorious Lord above as well. Amen.