

Pilgrim Keeper

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Date: 31 July 2005

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[0 : 00] O Lord, all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. And now as we turn to your word, we pray for the help of your Holy Spirit, that you might feed us by your word and strengthen us and comfort us.

In the name of Christ, amen. Amen. I was one of many children who grew up watching the classic CBC children's television show, The Friendly Giant.

I don't know if this is just a personal memory or how many of you have seen the show, but each show began with a tin whistle and a harp playing the theme song as the camera panned a miniature town until it stopped at an enormous boot.

Then the voice of the giant said, what did the voice of the giant say? Anybody remember? Look up. Way up. Okay, it's not just a private memory.

And the camera tilted up to the giant's face. And then we met the puppet Rusty the rooster, and Jerome the giraffe stuck his head through the window, and we all wished we had a chair of our own for two to curl up in.

[1 : 16] Psalm 121 begins with a pilgrim on the way to Jerusalem, looking up. Way up. And this psalm invites each of us this morning to do the same.

In all the journeys of life, we're invited to look up. Way up. Not just to the mountains, but to the one who made the mountains. This is another way of saying that you and I are called to pray as we journey through this life.

The horizontal line of our passage through time should always be bisected by a vertical line. It's all a matter, really, of where your eyes are looking.

A prayer life begins. It's founded not upon a list of prayer requests or personal agenda that we rush to God in His presence and ask Him to bless. A prayer life is founded on, it begins with a kind of consciousness, looking in a certain direction.

This Sunday, we're beginning a series of sermons on the 15 songs of ascent in the Psalms. Psalms 120 to 134. We're calling this series Prayers for the Pilgrim People of God.

[2 : 29] These are psalms which invite each of us to a deeper life of prayer as we travel along together as believers this summer. And I wonder, let's just pause here to say in the middle of the summer, in the middle of the year, in the middle of our lives, how is it going in your life when you think about prayer?

Are you drawn to prayer, attracted to prayer? Are you experiencing any difficulties or obstacles right now in prayer? Boredom? Maybe guilt?

Perhaps lack of instruction? Where are you at in your prayer life right now? Hear the Lord's gracious invitation to look up and to pray this summer.

If you have your Bibles open already to Psalm 121, we're going to be looking at this together, working through the passage. Again, it's on page 547 of the Old Testament section of your pew Bibles.

This is the second of the 15 psalms of ascent that seem to have been used by Israelites, traveling as pilgrims to and from Jerusalem for the great festivals, like the Feast of Tabernacles and so on.

[3 : 42] As a collection, these psalms probably also had special meaning for the exiles returning to Jerusalem in the 6th century from foreign captivity. Notice, for example, how the first three psalms of ascent flow together.

In Psalm 120, the pilgrim is pictured in exile among pagans in distant lands. Verse 5 of Psalm 120, Woe is me that I sojourn in Meshach, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar.

In case you haven't been to Meshach or Kedar recently, these are places to the far north and the far south of Israel, and they represent together the remotest pagan world. Glance over to Psalm 122,

and notice that the pilgrim is pictured at journey's end, having arrived at Jerusalem.

Verse 2 of Psalm 122, Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. But in our psalm this morning, Psalm 121, the pilgrim is pictured as on the way, en route, passing through the mountainous country that forms the way to Jerusalem.

This is a psalm for all of us in the middle of the year, in the middle of the summer, in the middle of our spiritual journey. This psalm teaches that you can safely navigate the journey of life.

[5 : 04] You can do this by continually looking up, way up, to God for His protection in all traveling conditions. We'll look at some of these conditions, traveling conditions in a minute, but first notice that what I'm saying is we can look up to God for His protection.

This psalm, as Neil was saying in the children's story, this psalm is all about God's protection of His pilgrim people as they travel. The way this psalm puts it is to say that God watches, or guards, or in our translation, He keeps us.

Now children that are here this morning, those of you that can read, I want you to look over at your parents' Bible, and I want you to see in Psalm 121 how many times you can count the word keep, or keeps, or keeper in this psalm.

And after church, your parents should give you a smartie for everyone you find, or something like that. Okay? Come up and tell me afterwards how many you could count. Keep, keeps, or keeper in the psalm.

God is above all the pilgrim keeper. Maybe you worry sometimes that God doesn't really notice your situation. Has He overlooked me?

[6 : 21] Has He missed my suffering? Quite the contrary, this psalm says. He is actively watching and looking out for you. We look up to God because He looks out for us.

Also notice that God protects His people both collectively as a pilgrim band, as the pilgrim people of God, but also individually. Each individual, unique pilgrim.

In verse 4, the Lord is described as the one who keeps Israel. But in verse 5, He is your keeper.

Singular. The pilgrim singer personally takes the truth home that God watches over Israel by telling himself that God also watches over him.

So, what are some of the traveling conditions in which we pilgrims must continually look up to God? First, look up to God when the mountains overwhelm you.

This is the way the psalm begins. I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

[7 : 32] As the psalm opens then, the singer is lifting his eyes to the hills. And I imagine these to be the rugged hills the pilgrim would encounter on the way to Jerusalem. Are these mountains beautiful?

Majestic? Leading the pilgrim to praise the Creator? Or are these mountains ominous? The sight of pagan high places? The haunt of wild animals?

The den of thieves? Or are they both? Even today, we might look upon mountains as pleasant enough to contemplate from a distance. But much more terrifying should we have to travel through them on foot in all weathers and as darkness falls.

I am inclined to think that the pilgrim found the mountains threatening. In any case, he certainly feels overwhelmed and in need of help. Maybe he is looking up into the distance in the direction of Jerusalem.

He asks where he is to find help in the midst of his difficult journey. And he answers the question by looking beyond the hills to the one who made the hills. To the one who, in fact, made the entire universe.

[8 : 39] His help comes from Yahweh, the Lord. So the first stanza, the first two verses together, the first stanza begins with the smallness and insecurity of the pilgrim, I.

Me. I. But it ends with the vastness and security of the maker of heaven and earth. Like the pilgrim, we too this morning can look up to God when the mountains overwhelm us.

As a church, we have a few mountains, don't we, that cast ominous shadows that could overwhelm us as we journey on in the coming year. Where do we turn for help?

We must look past these mountains to the God of the whole universe before whom all problems shrink in insignificance. What about you personally?

What are the mountains that loom up in your life's journey right now? Are there strained or broken relationships? Experience of illness or fatigue?

[9 : 43] Financial worries? Loneliness? The promise of this psalm is that none of these mountains or other ones you could name will finally block your way to Jerusalem, the place where God dwells.

If these mountains instead drive us to look for help and we lift our eyes from our problems to the one who is maker of heaven and earth, we will find ourselves almost unwittingly in an attitude, a posture, a prayer.

We will still have to traverse the mountains. We don't get just airlifted to Jerusalem. But we will be kept by God, protected and armed.

Having then caught this vision of the great God of the universe, Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth, the whole perspective of the psalm shifts from verse 3 to the end. The voice changes and it may be that we are meant to imagine a conversation partner, a fellow pilgrim breaking into the monologue.

The pilgrim's companion turns around and says, he will not let your foot be moved. Here then is a second traveling condition in which we must continually look up, weigh up to God for protection.

[11 : 00] Look up to God not only when the mountains overwhelm you, but secondly, look up to God when the way is unclear to you. The God who keeps his pilgrim people will not let you lose your footing when the path becomes confusing and the terrain uncertain.

Again, there may be times in this coming year as a church community when we are uncertain of the way forward. Uncertain which path is the Jerusalem road.

There may be times when the road seems risky and like we could easily stumble. I suppose common sense says, watch where you're going. Keep your eyes in the road.

But this psalm has a kind of counterintuitive spiritual sense that says, as it were, watch the one who is watching. Watch the one who is watching where you're going. The best way not to lose your path is actually to look up.

Again, this is to say that we are called to prayer as we face decisions, as we take risks in the journey. So what about for you personally?

[12 : 07] Is this a season of uncertainty for you? Are you perhaps facing important life decisions? Maybe even at a crossroads in the journey of life. Are you weighing some risky choices or maybe you've just made such a choice, taken such a risk?

This psalm does not absolve us of any responsibility to make such choices. The pilgrim cannot just stand still for fear of falling. He would be at Jerusalem. But we are offered protection as we keep looking up to God and entrusting our way to Him.

In these decisions, we're called to pray. Do you pray about your decisions? Big and small decisions that you have to make?

Do you look up? Do you have that double consciousness of taking your decisions into the presence of God moment by moment? Are you looking for God's way, the Jerusalem path?

If you are, then go ahead and take that risk. The Lord will not let your foot be moved. When the mountains overwhelm you or the path is unclear to you, these are traveling conditions that call you to look up to God for protection.

[13 : 18] But this is also true, thirdly, when the heat of the day fatigues you. Verse 5, the Lord is your keeper, the Lord is your shade on your right hand, the sun shall not smite you by day nor the moon by night.

I picture here the pilgrim facing the blistering, withering heat of the noonday sun. There is no shelter anywhere to be found. She feels utterly enervated, exhausted.

She cannot take another step. And here, the pilgrim keeper God promises to be a protecting shade. The sun shall not smite you or harm you by day.

This is more than to say that God is some kind of convenient umbrella. It's more that the God of the whole universe beyond the mountains is also very, very near and close at your right hand in the favored position, not distant and remote.

He notices the conditions of the journey and he personally shelters, comforts, strengthens his pilgrims in the heat of the day when life gets so utterly fatiguing.

[14 : 29] perhaps this is one of the main obstacles in the middle part of the Christian journey, monotony, sheer exhaustion. So often, the apostle Paul exhorted his churches not to grow weary in well-doing.

The preacher to the Hebrews in the book of Hebrews also challenges his readers to run with perseverance. The beginning of a church venture, the beginning of a ministry like the beginning of

the Christian life is kind of exciting.

Again, the culmination of a ministry when the fruit is on the branches is likewise thrilling. Springtime and autumn are both spiritual seasons that have their own attractions.

But the long middle bit, the heat of summer, July 31st, when the enthusiasm has faded and the fruits of maturity are not yet evident, that's the hard part.

This psalm encourages us that God has not forgotten us in the heat of the day. His shade, he is shade and he is near, even intimate.

[15 : 33] And exhaustion will not make us fail of our destination, will not keep us from Jerusalem. But to see this, we must be looking in the right direction and the right direction is up.

When the traveling conditions leave us exhausted, we must look up to God for protection in this attitude of prayer and he will arm us and strengthen us against this obstacle too. Perhaps for you personally, there may be exhaustion in the journey.

In our fast-paced, high-stress world, you may be simply physically exhausted and this easily leads to spiritual exhaustion, doesn't it? It's all interconnected.

I know of a spiritual director who works with students and when students come with spiritual problems, his first question is, how much sleep are you getting? If they are obviously seriously sleep-deprived, he asks them to get eight hours of sleep a night for two weeks and then come back. He said it's surprising how often this helped with, sometimes completely resolved, the spiritual concerns. But sometimes the exhaustion goes deeper than that.

[16 : 41] God promises to be your keeper in the heat of the day, in all manner of exhaustion, physical, spiritual, emotional. Again, it's not that the sun will suddenly cease to beat down or that the journey will not require exertion, but God promises to be near, to protect his own and to help them to their destination.

He's our keeper. So a pilgrim faces many dangerous traveling conditions. The mountains overwhelm you, the way is unclear to you, the heat of the day fatigues you.

And finally, fourthly, the darkness of the night frightens you. As the pilgrim walks through this mountainous country and the shadows begin to lengthen and night falls, he feels especially vulnerable to all the terrors of the night, to fears rational and irrational.

In verse 6, we read that the moon will not harm by night. In verses 3 and 4 earlier, the pilgrim was reminded that the God who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

This is the opposite of the irreverent nursery rhyme, it's raining, it's pouring, the old man is snoring. God is not about to fall asleep on his watch. This extends the emphasis in verse 2 on God's character as infinite, maker of heaven and earth.

[18 : 02] Since the one sure mark that we're not like that, that we are finite, is that we need to sleep. At some point, the pilgrim was going to have to close eyes and sleep. The most powerful rulers of human history with all their pretensions to greatness still had to curl up like babies and sleep.

Sooner or later, we must all sleep and this is surely a daily reminder of our mortality. Every time we yield our bodies to sleep, it is practice. Practice for the day when we will lay down our lives in faith in the one who can raise them up again on the last day.

In our need for sleep, we're not like God. He is able to watch without fail. Nothing passes his notice. Never sleeping, he ever watches. How comforting this must have been to the timid pilgrim on his way to Jerusalem as the light fades and the darkness begins to set in.

Fear, worry, anxiety, these things tend to swell into monstrous shapes in the long hours of the night. And often, what we fear is less overwhelming when it actually comes upon us than the fear was itself.

But here, too, we're reminded this morning that God remains his pilgrim's keeper. We are able to lay down our worries as the night gathers and our bodies prepare for sleep.

[19 : 22] When we are able to look up in faith and in prayer and entrust our souls to the one who will keep watch for us in the long hours of the night. This is true for our church and true for each one of us personally in our fears.

It's also true for you children that might be listening this morning. If I could speak to the children for a moment, I know that some of you have things that make you afraid. Some of you feel afraid when you go to bed at night.

Maybe you hear things on the radio. Maybe you see things on television or hear parts of adults' conversation and hear things that disturb you.

Even though your mommy and daddy try to keep you safe, you kind of pick up signals that there is real evil in the world, that the world is not always a safe place. You need to know for certain that God is not afraid of the things that make you afraid.

How many times did you find the word keep or keeps or keeper in this psalm? See? God wants to keep you through the hours of the night.

[20 : 28] He wants to protect you. So when you're afraid, tell him that you need him to protect you. God will help you and you will be learning to pray not just to be nice but because you need to and this can lay a foundation for prayer all the days of your life.

And for us as adults, I might just mention we regularly pray the colic for grace that we just prayed. Colics are these wonderful ancient prayers of the church that almost always predicate to say something about the character of God and then proceed to a request.

And so it's O Lord, our Heavenly Father, Almighty and Everlasting God who has safely brought us to the beginning of this day, has safely brought us through the fears of the night and then we pray for him to defend us in the same by his almighty power.

These are prayers for pilgrims. So there are many traveling conditions that threaten, threatening mountains, treacherous paths, withering heat, and a fear-filled night.

But the last two verses of the psalm are as reassuring as they are beautiful, reminding us that beyond all these traveling conditions that threaten the pilgrim, beyond all of this, God's care is universal.

[21 : 46] His protection includes every imaginable condition we might face. So verse 7, the Lord will keep you from all evil, from every evil, from all evil on the journey.

He will keep your life, your very life itself in his hands. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. Several times in this psalm, the singer has been using a Hebrew figure of speech called, scholars call him Amerism.

This is where the psalmist uses a pair of extremes to denote not just the boundaries but also everything in between, like heaven and earth in verse 2. So not just the sun and the moon, not just daylight and darkness, but everything in between.

None of this will harm you. All of this is reiterated in these last two verses. He will watch over your coming and going, both now and forevermore, from this time forth and forevermore, two more merisms.

Not only will God watch over you when you leave home and return, He will watch over you lovingly and faithfully on the whole journey.

[23 : 00] And so as the psalm ends, the journey to Jerusalem has become the journey of our whole lives. The Lord is watching over and keeping us from our setting out in life to our departing from this life, from sunrise to sunset.

God keeps His own in all our journeys and finally in the last journey of all. This remains true forevermore. It is also our reassurance now and everywhere in between.

Our children in Sunday school this year studied Jesus' activities as He traveled along the road to Jerusalem. And this reminds us that Jesus embodied the mission of Israel.

He enacted the journey to Jerusalem supremely and finally. God, the Keeper, came among us in the person of Jesus and He made the arduous journey for us and with us.

Jesus was the perfect pilgrim who entirely trusted Yahweh and faced all evil and triumphed. Christ is both the perfect pilgrim and the Keeper of the pilgrim in this psalm.

[24 : 06] And so as we read this psalm today, gathered as a community here at St. John's, we look up, way up, to Christ Himself and all the dangerous conditions of the journey that we face.

Our eyes are, as the writer of Hebrews says, fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. He is there at journey's beginning and at journey's end and all along our pilgrim path.

We look to Him to keep us from all evil and this very looking makes us people of prayer. prayer. Let me just pause for a minute to say that this psalm is beautiful and it's well known.

Its imagery is well known and as Anglicans we can be very fond of plummy words and beautiful, balanced cadences. But this is much more than that.

This is about God's very real protection in the messiness and suffering of life. And in a congregation this size, I know that there are many of you that today come to church and you are looking for help.

