Psalm 121

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Preacher: Rev. Chris Ley

[0:00] Let's pray as we stand. Our Father in heaven, I pray you would open our eyes to see you like Peter saw you.

! You would give us faith to follow you. And I pray specifically if we are afraid of the storms of life, you would come to us this morning through your word and you would save us.
We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. You can be seated. Amen. Life is a highway.
I just came up with that. That, of course, is quoting the famous Canadian philosopher Tom Cochran from 1991.
He's not the only person who sings about life being a highway. Maybe you've heard about the long and winding road. By the Beatles. Led Zeppelin sang about climbing a stairway to heaven.
[1:07] ACDC, a highway to hell. Marvin Gaye told us there ain't no mountain high enough. And Frank Sinatra told us he did it my way. And, of course, Bruce Springsteen was born to run.

All of these songs are about life as a journey. To be living is to be moving. To be moving is to be headed somewhere.
So where are you headed this morning? Where is the journey of life leading you right now? Is your path a stairway to heaven?
Or are you on the highway to hell? Is your life a long and winding road? Or are you born to run with no mountain high enough? For the next three weeks, we're going to be looking at the lyrics to three ancient songs that were sung on the road of life.
These are songs for the journey. They were originally sung on a hot, hard path that goes from Jericho way up to Jerusalem. A thousand meters of elevation over 35 kilometers.
[2:16] And so on that long road, people sang. These songs are found in the book of Psalms, which is a collection of prayers that have been sung by God's people for 3,000 years.

Psalms is the original hymn book and is the original book of common prayer wrapped into one. So we're going to be looking at three of these prayers sung by people who are on a pilgrimage toward God.
They're songs for the sojourner who is seeking the Lord. Today we get to look at Psalm 121, which is on page 516 of the Bible in front of you.
And this is a great place to start if you are curious about the Christian faith. Or maybe you come this morning and you're at a fork in your road and you're wondering about taking that first step towards God.
This is a great psalm for us at St. John's too. Many of you know we've just passed the 100-year mark on our journey together as a church.
[3:23] And now we're walking through a stretch of path that, if I'm honest, feels a little bit challenging. It's a time of transition we're walking through together. And we're not quite at our destination yet, are we?

So we're in this liminal space. We're somewhere between where we started and where we're going. And these Psalms of Ascent are the perfect prayer book to center us on God as we go.
They give us lyrics and a liturgy to pray and to praise Him and to provide nourishment and encouragement to fuel us for the road ahead. Psalm 121 tells us that God is greater and kinder and closer than you could ever imagine.
And it shows you what a life of walking toward Him will entail. It tells us that there are dangers on the path to God.
It tells us that there is a deliverer. And it tells us of our final destination. So let's dive in. First, along the road that leads to God, there are three dangers that Psalm 121 mentions.

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[4:34] First, in verse 3, we read of the danger of slipping. Our pew Bible translates it, your foot being moved. So the first danger on the path to God is that you might trip up.

You might stumble. When we stop looking at what's ahead of us, when we forget to watch our footing, to watch our steps, that's when we stumble or when we wander off course.
When I was a kid, I went to Whistler for skiing for a day with my brother and my sister. And my brother was a teenager and he drove us.
And if you've ever done this trip from Vancouver, you know you leave at the crack of dawn. Whistler opens at 9 a.m. or it used to. So you leave as early as you can to get there for 9. You go for the whole day and then you leave at 3 o'clock or 4 o'clock when the chairlifts close.
And it was sunny. So it was middle of winter, sunny, beautiful. We got up 5 o'clock in the morning, drove up to Whistler, skied all day, and then headed home. Ten minutes into the drive back to Vancouver, all of us were asleep in the car, including my brother, who unfortunately was driving.
[5:50] So the road turned sharply, as it does, if you've ever driven on the Sea to Sky Highway, but our car didn't turn with it. Instead, we went straight toward the forest.

And my brother woke up just as we were driving off the side of the road. And so he slammed his foot down on the nearest pedal. Unfortunately, that pedal was not the brake.
It was the accelerator. So we flew off the road, airborne, down a 10-foot drop, headlong into a dense forest. I'll tell you how that story ends a little later.
The point is that on the road of following God, if you are not looking ahead, watching where we walk, we will stumble or backslide or crash off course.
So this is an internal danger of discipleship. It's a danger of losing focus, of forgetting to look ahead, of not paying attention to our surroundings, or getting distracted, or lazy, or maybe too comfortable, or tired.
[7:04] If we lose focus on what's before us as followers of Jesus, we may crash, or slip, or stumble, or wander off course, or get lost.

You need to remain vigilant to follow Jesus, because the way is narrow. Our hearts are prone to wander, and our minds to lose focus.
Okay, the second danger on the journey toward God, mentioned in Psalm 121, is a danger that's external to us. The first one was an internal danger. This is now an external danger. And the danger is the threat of being exposed to perilous conditions.
In verse 6, it's described as the sun striking you by day. So on the road to God, there are sections where you will be exposed to the elements.
You'll be vulnerable to external circumstances and your surroundings. Jesus uses this same metaphor when he speaks about people who hear the gospel, but when trouble or persecution arises, external dangers, they fall away.
[8:13] It's like a seed planted on rocky ground that grows up really quickly, but as soon as the sun comes out, it is scorched and it withers because it has no root.

So the first danger of discipleship, or following Jesus, is internal. We lose focus on the path before us, and we wander, we slip up. Then the second danger is external, exposure to harsh conditions that we can't control.
The third danger is also in verse 6, and it's described as the moon striking you by night, which perhaps doesn't sound quite so threatening. In the ancient world, there was a belief that too much exposure to moonlight would cause you to lose your mind.
So in English, the words lunacy and the word lunar have the same root. They're connected. So the moon striking you by night could refer to threats to your mental well-being, dangers to the mind, such as depression or anxiety or burnout, discouragement or skepticism, or even a psychosis.
So these are the three dangers listed along the path of following God. stumbling, getting scorched by external dangers, or mental disorder.
[9:31] It doesn't make the path sound so rosy and so inviting, does it? I find listing those three dangers incredibly perceptive for a song that was sung 3,000 years ago.

But these three dangers are not what this psalm is about. But the insights I just gave you are what our former rector, David Short, would have called low-hanging devotional fruit.
If you're on staff at St. John's, you know the worst thing David could ever say to you is say that your talk was about low-hanging devotional fruit. These are interesting anecdotes.

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They're interesting little things to pull out of a passage. But it's not what the passage is about. This is not the central message of this psalm. Did you notice that I left out words in the verses I've just quoted?
I actually left out the subject of the entire psalm. The psalm is not about the mental and physical dangers on the road of life and how to avoid them, like some ancient self-help manual.
[10:42] The psalm is about God. He is the subject. He is the focus. It's not so much about the journey. The psalm calls us to lift our eyes from our immediate challenges and the difficult road before us and to refocus on God.

It's a prayer of praise. It's a song of salvation. It's celebrating that none of these dangers will harm the one who is following the Lord. So look again, starting at verse 2.
It says, My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. Now listen. He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on 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 forth and forevermore.
[11:56] See, the point of the psalm is that God is our guardian watching over us every step of our journey to him. He does not slumber.

He protects us. He keeps us. He guards us. He is with us. He leads me in paths of righteousness. And though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. So if you are on the road that leads to God, there are dangers.
But God himself will guard us and keep us every step of the way. That's the entire point of the psalm. It's not about the dangers.
It's about the deliverer who saves us from them. God helps you. He keeps you. He is the Lord, we're told.
[13:00] Notice the word Lord is in all caps in verses 2 and 5 and 6 and 7 and 8. If you're reading carefully, you may have seen that. Whenever you see Lord written out in all caps in the Bible, it means that in the original text, the word that was used was God's personal name, Yahweh.

And the human scribe who was writing out a copy of the verse felt I'm not holy enough to write God's personal name. So instead I'm going to write Lord, L-O-R-D. And then everyone will know the actual word is Yahweh.
So the psalm is saying my help comes from Yahweh. Yahweh himself keeps you. Yahweh is God's name. It's the name he introduces himself to as to Moses right before he saves his people from Egypt.
So it's a bit like if the king of England walked in the room right now, just imagine. And imagine he walked right up to you. How would you respond?
Well, chances are, after the shock, you'd probably stand if you could or you might bow or you'd likely say something like your majesty or your royal highness or my king.
[14:16] And then imagine the king stretches out his hand, picks you up, and he says, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Call me Charles. That's what God does when he gives us his personal name.

He doesn't want us to know him impersonally by his title or by his role. He wants us to call him his name. He gives us his personal name.
God is not some distant deity up in the clouds who is disinterested in our little lives on earth. He comes to us while we are still struggling on our long and winding road of life, and he then remains with us, and he keeps us.
God isn't just standing at the finish line seeing who's going to make it at the end. He's with you now. He keeps you and helps you, and he is watching over you.
So this psalm is a bold assertion that despite the many dangers out there and within us, they can never shipwreck the faith of a believer because God is our help.
[15:31] God is our keeper. God is with us, protecting us every step of our journey. The story of Peter walking on the water in our second reading is so apt because when Peter looks to Jesus, he is safe despite the obvious physical dangers.

It isn't until Peter looks away from Jesus and he notices the wind and the waves that he becomes scared, and it's as soon as he takes his eyes off Jesus that he immediately begins to sink below the

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waves, and Peter cries out, Lord, save me, and immediately Jesus reaches out his hand and he rescues him, and he will do the same for you.
The Lord will keep your life. Now this does not mean the life of a Christian is free from all trouble. Eugene Peterson in his book The Long Obedience in the Same Direction writes, the promise of the psalm is not that we will never stub our toes, but that no injury, no illness, no accident, no distress will have evil power over us.
That is, nothing will be able to separate us from God's purposes in us. He goes on, no literature is more realistic and honest in facing the harsh facts of life than the Bible.
at no time is there the faintest suggestion that the life of faith exempts us from difficulties. On every page of the Bible there is recognition that faith encounters troubles.
[17:15] but what it promises is preservation from all the evil in them. All the water in all the oceans cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside.

Nor can all the trouble in all the world harm you unless it gets within us. That's the promise of the psalm. God guards you from every evil.
God has got you. That is the message of this passage. Many of us in this community are going through seasons of acute suffering and loss.
In the past few months we have had many friends and family who have reached the end of their journeys. Collectively, we are walking together as a church through a hard section of our journey in a season that is full of change.
And it would be easy for us to feel vulnerable and weak and discouraged and afraid. The psalm reminds us to lift our eyes.
[18:29] God has got you. He will not let your foot slip. He who watches over his people will neither slumber nor sleep.

The sun will not harm us by day nor the moon by night. He watches over our life, over our coming and our going. God is with us, watching us, keeping us, guarding us, guiding us.
He is walking with us right now. Again, Eugene Peterson says, the Christian life is going to God. In going to God, Christians travel the same ground that everybody else walks on.
We breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores. We read the same newspapers. We're citizens under the same governments. We pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline.
We fear the same dangers. We're subject to the same pressures. We get the same distresses, and we're buried in the same ground. The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know that we are preserved by God.
[19:40] We know that we are accompanied by God. We know that we are ruled by God. And therefore, no matter the doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will guard us from every evil.

He guards our very life. We Christians believe that life is created and shaped by God, and that the life of faith is a daily exploration of the constant and countless ways in which God's grace and love are experienced.
God's got us. So we go to God this morning recognizing that he has been with us and remains with us the entire time. So where are we?
There are dangers on the road to God, but God himself will deliver us from all of them. Do you want to hear how my whistler story ends? So at this point, remember, we're off the road, airborne in our vehicle, careening towards a dense forest full of huge evergreen trees going about 80 or 100 kilometers an hour.
We are literally flying through the air. And this is when I wake up from my nap, because what I see is I see green branches on our windshield as we fly through them.
[21:01] And then, the second we land, we stop immediately. Not abrasively, like if you were to drive into a wall, but almost gently, as if we were soaring into a big pillow.

If you've ever picked up a little kid and thrown them onto your bed, it was kind of like that. We're all okay. We open our doors, except one that's slammed and broken shut, and we exit the car.
The car is a mess, and we can smell gasoline. We're in the forest, and what I notice is there's a huge trunk of an evergreen tree just to the right of our car, and then to the left of our car, there's a boulder, probably 15 feet tall.

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But neither of those objects are what stopped our car. If they had, I probably wouldn't be here. What stopped us was an impossibly large pile of dead leaves from a deciduous tree.
And if you know anything about botany or about Vancouver or BC habitats, you know that evergreen trees, such as the ones that were all around me, don't lose their leaves.
[22:17] That's why they're called evergreen. leaves fall off deciduous trees. But there were no deciduous trees in that forest. And yet, somehow, a huge pile of deciduous leaves, taller than our car, had been miraculously gathered in the middle of a remote evergreen forest, and our car landed right onto them with bullseye precision.

The police came, the fire department came, sirens and lights and vehicles everywhere, and they could not believe that we were okay without a single scratch.
I will never forget the policeman said to the three of us, if you believe in a God, you should be thanking him tonight, because he has sent his angels to protect you.
We see these kinds of crashes, and they don't ever end this way. The Lord is your keeper. He will keep your life.
I am not saying that Christians will not die in accidents. We know from the news this week that that is not the case. I do not know why God saved us that day, and why he didn't save the little girls at Camp Mystic this week from the Texas flooding, or countless other tragedies that we hear of every day.
[23:43] But what I do know is that even if we are killed in some tragic accident or illness, God still keeps us. God's salvation extends to us even beyond death.

We read in the Bible that God so loves the world that he has sent his son to save it. All of us are in danger of death. One day, all of us will die.
People try to find solutions to this problem through man-made religions and spiritualities and ecstatic experiences, and that's actually what verse one is all about. This is the verse we all know. I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? But you don't know the context probably. The pilgrims singing this were journeying up to Jerusalem, and they were looking at the mountains all around them.
And those mountains were known to be the places of pagan temples and shrines, where things like human sacrifice and cult prostitution were practiced.
[24:47] And so these pilgrims are looking around to all the worldly solutions to all of our problems, to man-made spirituality, and they're saying, is this where our help comes from? No, it's not.

Man-made religion and spirituality is not the source of our strength. Self-help books are not going to fix all our problems. Neither is nature.
Neither is seeking pleasure. Our help does not come from material or man-made means. These roads are dead ends that ultimately will lead only to death.
So it's not the mountains, but it's the maker of the mountains. God himself. He is the one who strengthens us. Our rock of salvation is Jesus, our Lord and Savior, who is the way and is the only solid ground that holds us fast and firm through the fleeting chances and changes of this mortal life. Jesus came to earth to pave the path, to make the way for us to be with God forever. To make a way so that even though we die, yet we shall live with him forever.
[26:03] And interestingly, that's how the passage ends. The passage ends with the words, God 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 forth and forever more.

Notice the last word, forever more. the path to God leads to eternity. The promise that God will keep your life is an eternal promise.
It's not just about this 80-year life, 90, 100, 50, whatever year life we have on earth. It's eternal life. The promise is that God will keep you, and that is an eternal promise, a promise that doesn't end in your death.
Life with God transcends death. Jesus tells us he came that we may have life. This is what he's talking about. He's come to deliver us from all the dangers of life so that we might reach our destination, eternal life with God.
Jesus offers to remove the sin that ties us up and weighs us down and so easily entangles us and causes us to stumble and wander from the way of God. He's forgiven us our missteps and our trespasses.

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[27:26] He sends us his Holy Spirit to dwell within us and now make us like him. He is the source of our strength, as the psalm declares. God is with us.

He is for us. He has come to save us. He has come to dwell within us, and he will guard us and guide us and hold us fast. No one who trusts in him will be lost.

God loves you. He has always loved you. He will always love you. So the psalm invites you to live your life in this assurance.

If you are following Jesus, which you can start doing today, God has got you. No matter what mistakes you make, no matter what unexpected turns on your path, he will protect you and help you and keep you from this time forth and forever.

This psalm reminds us of the dangers. It tells us of our deliverer. And finally, it declares our final destination on the journey toward God.

[28:39] God. So lift up your eyes. He's got us. We will be okay. Thanks be to God.

God. God. Thank you.

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