

Last weekend I returned to Rome, Georgia and Berry College where I studied music and got my undergraduate degree. While not aligned with any particular denomination, the school was founded as a Sunday school for Mountain children so religion has and continues to have a strong influence. So much so that we have an official school Psalm, number 121, the psalm appointed for today.

I've long pondered the words of this Psalm and have heard many sermons preached upon it. It is one of a collection of Psalms about traveling so perhaps that's why it keeps coming back across my life. Of course, it was written for a different time and style of travel. But the lessons from it are no less important.

I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come?

The opening always seemed a mystery to me until Pastor Larry Mitchell explained that you looked to the hills because the robbers and thieves along the journey to Jerusalem hid in those hills waiting to attack. While they may be a lovely sight, keeping your eyes up meant being on the lookout for things unexpected and dangers known.

That's how we have to live our lives. Always looking up. But also because in looking up, we see others. We see those around us and those in need. Those who need help and those who can help. I must lift my eyes, because it gives me an understanding of the world around me.

Of course, the answer to the question about where does help come from, it comes from the Lord, the maker of all things. But interestingly, as I pondered this text, I noted the next line.

God will not let your foot be moved. In tough walking trails, what is our tendency? We look down.

While I'm not the great hiker I wish I were, exploring the Appalachian Trail or trekking through Nepal, I do know that in tough travels, my head is down. Keeping each step sure and staying upright by focusing on me and my own feet. It's natural. But in doing that, I'm not looking up. I'm not focused on those around me and other folks. Sure me skidding down the trail and taking them out because I stumbled isn't the safest thing either. But in looking down I can also overthink things. I can begin to question my route. I can be so focused on the current step that I fail to see the obstacles ahead.

I lift up my eyes.

But that means trust. Trusting that I will make the right moves. Trusting that someone will be there to protect me and help me. Trusting that all will be well.

In this life metaphor that is a psalm, it goes at great lengths to give us hope in trusting in God. God doesn't sleep, not even nod off (the difference between slumber and sleep by the way). God made the place I am walking. God knows the way. God is with me from my going out to my coming in.

In a world where you left for work in the morning and returned to the safety of home only at the close of day, that phrase encompassed your whole life. Your going out and your coming in. The whole time you are away from the safety and security of hearth and home, God is there.

These are comforting words. But there is a catch.

Nothing in here says that God magically makes all things hunky dory and keeps us free from all trials. I have to keep my eyes up. God will be there to help me, but the robbers may still come. God will be at my right hand, but God doesn't fight every battle for me.

This is part of the lesson from our Gospel. Sometimes the battle will go on longer than we want. The widow, who isn't being treated as social law says she should be, never gives up. The judge is wrong. Widows and orphans are to be cared for according to Judaic law. But the judge, like many of us with the Gospel today, chooses to ignore that obligation.

That doesn't make the obligation go away. The widow continues to ask. We might even say pester the judge and the judge relents, finally, not because it is right, but because he is annoyed. We are both the widow and the judge here. We constantly ask if not pester God to make things right for us, but how many times have we had the opportunity to be God's hands in the world making things right for others and passed it by because it was not really convenient or socially advantageous.

My help comes from the lord, but often through the hands and lives of those around me and the hands and life of me to others.

God will protect me on life's journey. That I know, but in keeping my head up, focused on the world around me and not on my feet and immediate surroundings, I am able to serve God and help others. I trust that God will keep my steps sure and firm so that I can keep my focus on the world ahead.

The Psalm is one of protection but also responsibility. One of trust in God, but obligation to do our part. For God to answer more quickly than the judge, God needs people who are willing to act. People who God can count on when work needs to be done. We all want the miracles in our lives to be like water turning to wine, but some days the miracle is me dragging my lazy self out of bed to do the work I've been called to do. Not every miracle is flashy but every action can be a miracle to glorify God and restore the justice the real kingdom of God brings.

May we all find the faith and courage to keep our heads high, looking to those ahead and preparing to help those in need who cry for justice. God will keep us steady. God will keep us safe in this world. Because we are called to be God's people and presence in this world, its why we have a going out and coming in, from this day forth and forever more.

Amen.