

“Going Out and Coming In”

March 13, 2022

Selah: Life in a Minor Key series

How many of us track steps? Maybe you wear a pedometer or use an app on your phone. Some of us may walk for a certain amount of time each day or do exercise at home that helps us move and stay active. If you're someone who tracks steps, maybe you get into competition with your family and friends. It's a way to be accountable, to keep going, to find motivation. Pastors in our conference have an opportunity to track steps as a part of our health plan, which has been a great blessing for many of us.

We got a new treadmill earlier this year, which has been great in the midst of a lot of cold weather. I can set the pace for how fast I want to walk or jog. I can set the incline, and you wouldn't think it would make so much difference, but even a slight incline makes the walk more challenging. Being forced to keep pace and to use the incline is good for me.

Beyond tracking steps, what about miles you've traveled? Though working from home has changed some of those patterns, going to and from work or school for years makes for a lot of miles. If you're someone who travels a lot, you've logged a lot of airline miles. And beyond the physical miles, we've all been on the journey of life - logging miles traveled with loved ones through joys, celebrations, heartaches, struggles, and even death and grief.

Whether physical or emotional, our journey may have had moments when we've felt like we were traveling alone even if we were with others. We've wondered if there's help on the journey. Perhaps we've asked God if God is really with us. And as we're making this Lenten journey individually and together, Psalm 121 offers us some words of assurance.

Psalm 121 is a part of a collection of psalms that people sang together - fifteen of them - that are called songs of ascent. Many of us make playlists for our exercise routines to keep us going. Think of these songs as a playlist for those who were making the journey to Jerusalem. These are songs of steps - a traveler's psalm, a song for someone making a journey.

So, this psalm and others would have been sung while people were on the move, too - even making the arduous journey to Jerusalem to the Temple that was literally on the hill. It wasn't so much climbing a mountain, but getting up the long incline to the city on a hill - an elevation of about 2,700 feet.

This wasn't an easy trek. There were no paved roads – probably a lot of potholes - though there were probably some well-worn paths. Even so it's a diverse topography to navigate. It required time and energy, so even as they made the journey, they were praying. Maybe you've had an experience of praying while you were traveling. Psalm 121 offers a word about God's constant care at all times - even in the heat of the day when they needed shade and in the cool (and potential danger) of the dark night when they needed protection. "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in..."

The journey to Jerusalem took people up (and down), and they sang as they made a journey to a sacred place. It was a song to prepare them for worship at the Temple as they went for particularly special times. There were three main festivals when Jewish would travel to Jerusalem: Passover is in the Spring, Shavuot (Feast of Weeks) in the late Spring, and Sukkot (Festival of Booths) in the Fall.

They sang this psalm together, but individually, as a way to get ready for worship. How many of us prepare ourselves for worship? This morning may have been particularly difficult when we lose an hour of time. We may have felt rushed.

I know what I have to get done every week, but really taking time to center our hearts, to offer this time fully to God, is a challenge. It's difficult to get out the door and get in this space without a lot on our minds. It's hard to settle down in our homes or wherever we join online, to lay distractions aside, to get the list out of our head of all that we need to do. But there's something to be said for preparing our hearts. **SLIDE:** definition of *selah* - to pause and calmly think, take note, this is important/**TAG.**

For us, right now, this psalm offers the promise of God's presence. For those travelers, this isn't just anyone who provides help. This is God - Maker of heaven and earth. God is our Keeper. It's not a title we use a lot, but it's a powerful one to claim. What does it mean that God keeps us? *The Lord is your Keeper...The Lord will keep you from all evil...He will keep your life.*

If you want the easy analogy, think of a soccer goalie - sometimes called a keeper. What does the goalie do? Protects the goal! The goalie or keeper doesn't let any shots get by - and can actually be the reason for victory. God is more than a goalie, but that idea is powerful. God is our Keeper - protecting us, not allowing for our mistakes to overtake us, offering us grace and mercy on the journey.

Think of the journey to Jerusalem. Traversing difficult terrain offered a lot of opportunities for stumbling, falling, or getting injured. Have you ever taken a trail that was more difficult than you anticipated? Literally or figuratively?

In the late Spring and Fall, the sun could be very hot and dry in the Judean desert. Once in a while, they would find a tree that offered shade. And there they would rest for a while. *The Lord is your shade at your right hand...*

The psalmist is saying that like the tree that provided a shade and a place of rest, the Lord will protect you from all harm. Have you ever been in the desert in the dark without a lot of ambient light? "The moon by night" refers to the dangers of the night: robbers and wild animals. God is your protector, your keeper.

This isn't surveillance, but a reminder of God's constant care and presence. When we celebrate those big moments, God is there. When we struggle through the toughest moments, God is there. And God is there in the in-between - the regular, mundane, and routine. In every moment, this psalm is a blessed reminder. And especially in unsettled and unsettling times, this psalm offers sure footing. We all need it. This week, I listened to an interview with a UMC pastor named Volodymyr Prokip who serves a student ministry in Lviv, Ukraine. He spoke of the strength he finds in the Gospel - and in the promise of God's care for those who are hurting and the opportunity he has to share what Jesus means to him in the midst of this time. He talked about offering aid to people in need and spoke of having a peace within that was amazing to hear.

Prokip reminded me that it matters where we lift our eyes. It matters where we focus. And I thought of so many people of faith who have lived out the truth of this song - that our help comes from God, that God is our Keeper no matter what. It's easy to say, but more difficult to do.

And it's a challenge. A life of faith and following Jesus isn't the promise that we stay in the safe, guarded places. We don't walk through easy paths or find ourselves in forever beautiful, serene spaces. We're not living in bliss or without stress. Sometimes life is hard. And I'll be honest that I can't imagine facing what so many do around the globe - serving people in the midst of war and conflict or finding safe spaces to worship because of religious persecution.

Following Jesus is a blessing. Following Jesus offers us peace, but it doesn't ensure a life of ease, free from distractions, struggles, or strife. That's never been the promise. If that's the expectation, we need to go back and read the Gospels again

and hear Jesus talk about sacrifice - and the lengths that agape love goes to. It goes all the way.

There's no guarantee of ease, but the psalm reminds us that we're given a new perspective. If we take a moment - SELAH – to practice the pause. Where do we lift our eyes? Where do we focus? Where does our help come from? From the Lord - the One who made all things and holds all things. That's why our witness is so important - those God moments we share reflect God's presence and care - and encourage others to trust in God.

Eugene Peterson wrote: "All the water in all the oceans cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside. Nor can all the trouble in world harm us unless it gets within us. That is the promise of the psalm." That doesn't mean we disregard or dismiss the troubles of the world. We must care about the whole world that God loves. But we trust that God is with us and working for good.

I wonder what this psalm sounds like to our friends in Christ in Eurasia right now. *Where does my help come from?* Those who are fleeing Ukraine and seeking refuge, those who are protesting in Russia, those finding places to worship, those delivering babies in a subway station and sheltering in unfamiliar spaces. *Where does my help come from?* God's help is ours to pray for and offer in the name of Jesus.

Just as we're encouraged to lift our eyes and remember where our help comes from, we're also assured that God watches over us. The psalm says "I lift my eyes..." and then every time after that, it's God who is watching. It's when we lift our eyes to God that we realize that God has been watching us.

A 14th century German mystic named Nicholas of Cusa wrote a book called ***The Vision of God***, and he talks about the "omnivoyance" of God - that God is always watching over us; nothing escapes God's loving, caring, protective, and concerned gaze. In those moments when we feel like we're going it alone, this psalm reminds us that we're not. God is near.

My grandma loved this psalm and asked that it be read at her funeral when we celebrated her life and claimed her eternal life with God. Even then it offered a witness to God's care for her - and for all of us. And along with it was a song called *Give Me Jesus*. It's a spiritual that speaks to the promise of God's presence and peace: *In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus. You can have all this world, but give me Jesus.*

The season of Lent calls us into holy time - and maybe even calls us to adopt a new routine. But we're called to recognize God's presence with us in our routine. *The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in...*

Lent calls us to sacrifice as a way to grow closer to Christ. To say "give me Jesus" means that we want to be more like him. We want to grow into his likeness, which calls us to sacrificial love. Some of us have given something up or taken something on. But as I've thought about it for myself, I wonder... **SLIDE:** Is it a sacrifice or just an inconvenience?

Do we really do something sacrificial enough that we notice it and it actually costs us something? Do we offer time to help someone else? Does our routine change so that we're reaching out beyond ourselves? Are we willing to put limits on our time for ourselves – time with our phone or TV - to make time for others? Can we sacrifice our conveniences and feel the weight of it?

The spiritual life is a journey where God is always calling us to move - to grow, to change, to dig more deeply, to love more fully. And the words of this psalm give us courage. God is the Maker of heaven and earth - that's the big picture. God is our Keeper - that's the more intimate picture. God keeps us and holds us. God doesn't rest or grow weary of loving us, and we can trust that we are not alone - no matter where we're going.

It made me think of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in the 1700s, who proclaimed a simple and powerful truth as he passed away into eternal life: *Best of all is, God is with us.* A profound theological truth and the promise of this psalm. I pray we can claim it for ourselves – and pray it for others.

Let us pray...