

Jan 23 – (Leaders) Psalm 121 “Say to your Soul – ‘Soul, God is your Keeper’”

Psalm 120 guides the first step of our spiritual pilgrimage. Expressing with the psalmist our deep discontent with the patterns of the world and in repentance setting our faces to the New Jerusalem. Psalm 122 reflects thanksgiving for safe arrival in Jerusalem. Psalm 121 then reflects on the pilgrimage itself which is a metaphor for the journey of life.

Read Psalm 121

1. What dangers does the psalmist anticipate will be a part of their pilgrimage to Jerusalem?

Vs. 1 → though Tim took a different line on this verse – some of the commentators suggested that the looking at the hills could be a reference to the fear one would have of bandits hiding in them ready to fall upon unsuspecting travelers

vs. 3 → the loose gravel that makes sure footing suspect leading to breaks, sprains, abrasions

vs. 6 → the protracted exposure to the sun with limited hydration that predisposed one to sunstroke

vs. 6 → the resulting fatigue and anxiety of such a journey that undermines mental and emotional health – what the ancients called “moonstroke” from which we get our word lunacy

How is the journey of life similarly fraught with such dangers?

This is simply a reflection question – that obviously if you let it could take up your whole time. It would be important I should think to hear from everyone so that you can apply the truths of the Psalm personally. It would also be important to get a wide range of different dangers so that there are many “touchpoints” for further discussion.

2. The psalmist lifts their eyes to the hills and cries out in desperation – “Where does my help come from?” The hills reflected their cultures answers to just such a question, for atop every hill was a high place, a temple, a shrine, a sacred grove of trees. What are the high places in our culture that give answers to our cries of desperation in the midst of the troubles of life?

If it would help to trigger the conversation - here is the unedited excerpt from the sermon where Tim reflected on this question:

We may not ascend the hill to get intoxicated in the temple of dionysis – the god of wine - but the inclination to numb ourselves to the pain is still there – in the midst of the pandemic we headed up to the LCBO to buy up alcohol in record amounts that they say will take 5 years to return to pre-pandemic levels – alcohol not your thing? – there are other ways to numb the pain.

We may not ascend the hill to the temple of the fertility goddess to escape the sorrows of life in the arms of a temple prostitute – either male and female – but we have our own escapes – we can boot up our computers for instant access to someone who can titillate our fantasies – there is always a new show to be binge watched – always the next holiday to plan and anticipate.

We may not ascend the hill with an animal to have the priest give us wisdom and direction through reading the entrails – but we will certainly ascend the high place of success – taking direction from the latest self-help book or tweet from the talk show host – the celebrity – the CEO – because as a culture we worship success - believing that success has magical properties – that success in one area means success in all others – really? – success as an actor – success pretending to be someone else makes you an expert in life – in relationships – in politics? – common now? probably not much better than reading entrails.

We may not ascend the hill - but it is said that the highest buildings in a city reveal what a culture worships – the tallest buildings in Toronto? – banks – graced with their symbols – CIBC – TD – RBC – we may not ascend those hills to purchase the amulet – the spell – the enchantment to keep us safe – but we will ascend those steps and purchase the insurance – the TFSA – the RRSP – believing similarly that such things will keep us safe – but the things that harm us the most – death – broken relationship – illness – come regardless of how much we have – and those of us who have rested our security in money are often the least able to handle such things – because we believed we were protected – or that we can somehow buy our way out of it.

We may not ascend a hill – but when our ancestors got to the top of that hill and were met with the images of the gods – it was like looking in a mirror – for the gods were fashioned after human likeness – the high place of our own culture similarly reflects back to us an image of ourselves – self-sufficiency reigns – look inward – you have what it takes – you are the master of your own destiny - the captain of your own ship.

The Psalmist looks above the hills and locates their help in the Lord who is maker of heaven and earth.

3. The Hebrew of vs. 3 reveals that the first movement of the psalmist to lay a hold of this help is prayer. Is prayer our first response when we encounter the dangers inherent in the journey of life? Why or why not?

This is simply a self-reflection question. I sought in the sermon to acknowledge my own struggle to go to prayer first as I linger a little in the hills – a little numbing here – a little escape over there – a little self-sufficiency in this situation – a little borrowed wisdom over there. When I do go to prayer I am left thinking – why did I spend all that time and energy and effort lingering in the hills – I should have gone to prayer first and you would think that that would predispose me to going there first the next time I am in the midst of distressing circumstances. Sadly it is not.

It makes sense that we go to the hills for they are all around us, part of the air that we breathe. It is great wisdom then that three times a year on the way up to Jerusalem the pilgrims reorientated to this truth from Psalm 121 – we grab a hold of the help from the Lord in prayer.

The Hebrew of vs. 4-8 gives us an indication that we are overhearing the internal dialogue of the Psalmist. The Psalmist is taking a hold of themselves and saying – “Listen self – there is something in this you need to hear!”

4. What truths about God does the psalmist remind themselves of? How would you anticipate laying a hold of these truths would impact the present experience of the psalmist?

Vs. 2 → You God are over all – to know that even these circumstances are under God’s sovereignty gives us a security that all things will be brought to completion in Him – nothing is outside of his control.

Vs. 3 → In Him there is a firm foundation – sure footing – there is stable ground to be found in knowing him - in finding our sense of self in him

Vs. 4 → There is never a time where God is not active – as a result I can rest because I am not God He is

Vs. 5 → God is the shade on my right hand – there is never time when God is not with me – as close as my very shadow – this undercuts the feelings of being alone or that no one understands what I am going through.

Vs 6-8 → My night my day – my going out and coming in – every aspect of my life is under his care – there is nothing too small for him to be concerned about – I can go to him with everything and anything.

He will keep me from all evil – meaning that each distressing circumstance has the ability to either prove and improve my faith and character – or undermine and destroy faith and character – I can rely upon him to direct me to the former and away from the latter (This comes from a brief reflection on the affirmation in the Lord’s prayer – Lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil)

Another way to see this is a protection from the "evil one" that is part of the Lord's prayer affirmations.

5. In your own life where might you need to stop listening to yourself and start talking to yourself – reminding yourself of who God is – what he has done – and what he has pledged to do? What impact would you think that would have on your current situation?

Again this is a personal reflection question. It would help as a leader to have your example ready to go to help bring it to the surface for others.

I would also encourage you to bring the gospel – the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection into this as the truth we preach to ourselves.