

Psalm 121 -<sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. <sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; <sup>4</sup> indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. <sup>5</sup> The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand; <sup>6</sup> the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. <sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; <sup>8</sup> the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

John 3:1-17-- Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” <sup>3</sup> Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” <sup>4</sup> “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit<sup>[b]</sup> gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup> You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You<sup>[c]</sup> must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup> The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” <sup>9</sup> “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. <sup>10</sup> “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”<sup>[e]</sup> <sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

A MAN WAS DRIVING DOWN THE ROAD WHEN A SERIES OF BILLBOARDS CAUGHT HIS ATTENTION.

THEY WERE PARTICULARLY INTERESTING TO THE DRIVER WHO WAS A PASTOR.

ONE SAID “HELP IS HERE” THEN ANOTHER SAID, “FOR LIFE’S UNEXPECTED MOMENTS HELP IS HERE”!

“ANOTHER SAID “FOR THAT BIG PURCHASE HELP IS HERE”! THE LAST BOARD SAID, “FOR WHATEVER! HELP IS HERE”! THEN, IT GAVE THE NAME OF A BANK.

THE POINT OF THE AD WAS TO DRAW PEOPLE TO THAT PARTICULAR BANK AS A SOURCE- THAT COULD HELP THEM WITH THEIR FINANCIAL NEEDS.

OBVIOUSLY, THE PROBLEM WITH THE AD IS THE BANK IS NOT GOING TO BE WILLING TO HELP EVERYONE WHO ASKS.

THEN THERE IS THE FACT THAT THE HELP MANY PEOPLE NEED IS NOT RELATED TO MONEY AND THE THINGS IT CAN BUY OR OTHERWISE PROVIDE.

THUS, WE ARE REMINDED ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEKING THE KIND OF HELP WE ACTUALLY NEED, AS WELL AS THE BEST PROVIDER OF THAT HELP.

FOR EXAMPLE: THE JEWISH PEOPLE SOUGHT AND PRAYED FOR COUNTLESS YEARS, FOR GOD’S HELP IN DELIVERING THEM FROM FOREIGN OPPRESSORS.

MANY JEWISH RELIGIOUS LEADERS, LIKE THE PHARISEES BELIEVED THE BEST WAY TO GET GOD’S HELP WAS TO FOLLOW THE LETTER OF THE LAW.

THEY PROBABLY HOPED THEIR OBEDIENCE WOULD PERSUADE GOD TO SEND THE MESSIAH.

SADLY, ALMOST EVERYONE WAS MISGUIDED IN THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF JUST HOW EXPANSIVE GOD’S PLAN FOR MESSIAH’S MISSION WOULD BE.

AND THIS BRINGS US TO THE GOSPEL PASSAGE AND THE PHARISEE, AND MEMBER OF THE RULING COUNCIL IN JERUSALEM, NICODEMUS, WHO WAS TROUBLED.

HIS PROBLEM WAS A RABBI FROM GALILEE. YOU SEE, HIS WORDS AND MIRACLES POINTED TO A MAN SENT FROM GOD, WHO WAS PERHAPS, THE MESSIAH.

HOWEVER, THE RABBI JESUS, SPOKE AND ACTED IN MANY WAYS THAT WERE UNLIKE THE JEWISH EXPECTATIONS OF THE MESSIAH.

SO NICODEMUS DECIDED TO HAVE A PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH JESUS AT NIGHT, WHEN PRYING EYES AND EARS WERE NOT AROUND.

HE THOUGHT, PERHAPS, TO REASON THINGS OUT WITH JESUS, IN THE COMMON FASHION OF JEWISH MEN ON RELIGIOUS MATTERS.

IN SHORT, NICODEMUS WANTED TO GAIN AN INTELLECTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS' MOTIVES AND IDENTITY, SO HE COULD DECIDE IF JESUS ACTUALLY WAS THE MESSIAH.

JESUS, HOWEVER, DID NOT RESPOND IN THE WAY THE OTHER MAN EXPECTED. AS WE KNOW, THE SAVIOR WAS NOT FOCUSED ON DELIVERANCE FROM ROME, BUT FROM SIN.

WHILE THE PHARISEE'S THOUGHTS WERE FOCUSED ON THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD, THE SAVIOR'S WERE NOT.

THEREFORE, JESUS RESPONDED BY CHALLENGING NICODEMUS TO LET GO OF HIS EXPECTATIONS ABOUT HOW THE KINGDOM SHOULD OR WOULD COME INTO BEING ON EARTH,

HE DID SO, BECAUSE ONLY BY LETTING GO COULD NICODEMUS HOPE TO BE OPEN TO GOD'S GIFT OF SALVATION JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD TO PROVIDE.

JESUS SOUGHT TO DRAW NICODEMUS' FOCUS AWAY FROM THE PHYSICAL INTO THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD, AND THE REDEMPTION THE MESSIAH WOULD PROVIDE.

HE SPOKE ABOUT THE KINGDOM BEING IMPLANTED WITHIN A PERSON, WHICH REQUIRES AN INNER TRANSFORMATION, MADE POSSIBLE ONLY BY GOD.

THEREFORE, THE SAVIOR SPOKE ABOUT BEING BORN OF THE SPIRIT, ACCORDING TO THE LOVE AND WILL OF THE LORD.

JESUS TOLD NICODEMUS HIS MISSION WAS TO REVEAL THE GRACE AND LOVE OF GOD THAT WOULD OPEN THE GATES OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN ON EARTH.

HE SAID: "FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON, THAT WHO SO EVER BELIEVETH IN HIM WILL NOT PERISH BUT WILL HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE."

AND JUST IN CASE NICODEMUS DID NOT GRASP JESUS' ROLE AS THE MESSIAH, HE ADDED THAT HIS PRESENT PURPOSE WAS NOT TO CONDEMN THE WORLD, BUT SAVE IT.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I SHARED A POEM SOMEONE ELSE WROTE THAT WAS INSPIRED BY JOHN 3:16.

LET US LISTEN TO IT ONCE MORE, SINCE IT REFLECTS ON THE MEANING OF EACH PART OF THAT VERSE, SAYING:

"FOR GOD--THE GREATEST GIVER; SO LOVED--THE GREATEST DEGREE; THE WORLD--THE GREATEST COMPANY;

THAT HE GAVE--THE GREATEST SACRIFICE; HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON-- THE GREATEST GIFT;

THAT WHOSOEVER--THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITY; BELIEVETH--THE GREATEST SIMPLICITY; IN HIM--THE GREATEST ATTRACTION;

SHOULD NOT PERISH-- THE GREATEST PROMISE; BUT--THE GREATEST DIFFERENCE; HAVE--THE GREATEST CERTAINTY; EVERLASTING LIFE--THE GREATEST POSSESSION."

OF COURSE, THE POEM AND THE SCRIPTURE WHICH INSPIRED IT ARE ONLY MEANINGFUL OR RELEVANT TO US IF WE ACCEPT THE GIFT OF NEW LIFE JESUS OFFERS.

AND ACCEPTANCE INVOLVES MORE THAN AN INTELLECTUAL AGREEMENT, IT REQUIRES NOT ONLY RECEIVING, BUT ALSO LIVING THE NEW LIFE CHRIST PROVIDES.

WE CAN FIND HELP TO DO THIS FROM THE LORD-THROUGH SCRIPTURE, PRAYER, WORSHIP, AND LOOKING TO THE HILL OF CALVARY AND THE CROSS OF CHRIST.

PSALM 121 IS A BEAUTIFUL REMINDER THAT GOD INDEED IS OUR HELPER, WHO KEEPS OUR LIVES.

THE MESSAGE REMINDS US THERE IS NO SHAME IN ADMITTING WE NEED HELP AND LOOKING TO THE LORD FOR HELP AND GUIDANCE.

IT IS CALL TO FAITH FOR GOD'S PEOPLE. BUT AS POWERFUL AS THIS MESSAGE WAS AND IS FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE-IT TAKES ON A NEW AND GREATER DIMENSION FOR CHRISTIANS.

THE PSALM ORIGINATED, IT IS BELIEVED, AS A PRAYERFUL SONG USED BY PILGRIMS GOING TO JERUSALEM.

YOU SEE THE CITY AND THE TEMPLE MOUNT WERE ABOUT A 700 FOOT CLIMB FOR TRAVELERS COMING PAST THE DEAD SEA.

THE JOURNEY WAS NOT AN EASY ONE FOR MOST PEOPLE WHO TRAVELED ON FOOT, AND YET IT WAS WORTHWHILE TO THEM.

THE SEASON OF LENT PROVIDES CHRISTIANS WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE IN A SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE THAT MAY ALSO BE CHALLENGING, AND YET WORTHWHILE.

TRULY, WE CONSISTENTLY NEED TO REMEMBER WHO OUR HELPER IS, AND WHY WE CAN COUNT ON HIM ALWAYS.

LET US TAKE SOME TIME TO CONSIDER THE CHALLENGE AND PROMISE FOUND IN THE WORDS OF THIS PSALM, SINCE IT CAN BE USEFUL NOT ONLY DURING LENT BUT ALL YEAR ROUND.

LIFE, AFTER ALL, CAN BE A CHALLENGING JOURNEY, AND NOT ALL OBSTACLE WE ENCOUNTER, OR SITUATIONS THAT IMPACT US PHYSICALLY OR EMOTIONALLY ARE IN OUR CONTROL.

SOMETHINGS IN LIFE ARE LIKE A MOUNTAIN LOOMING OVER US OR OVERSHADOWING OUR MINDS WITH A SENSE THIS IS MORE THAN WE CAN HANDLE-ESPECIALLY ON OUR OWN.

THE PSALM DIRECTS OUR ATTENTION ON WHERE TO LOOK FOR HELP: WE ARE TO LOOK TO THE LORD OUR GOD.

NATURALLY, FAITH IS NECESSARY, AS IS TRUSTING GOD TO HELP IN HIS OWN WAY.

THE BASIS FOR HAVING FAITH IN THE LORD AND TRUSTING IN HIM IS PROCLAIMED AND REAFFIRMED IN THE VERSES OF THE PSALM IN VARIOUS WAYS.

THE FIRST REASON TO LOOK TO GOD WE ARE GIVEN IS THE FACT THE LORD IS THE CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH.

GOD INDEED IS NOT JUST THE CREATOR BUT OUR CREATOR, WHO KNEW US BEFORE WE WERE BORN, AND KNOWS US EVEN NOW MORE FULLY THAN WE KNOW OURSELVES.

WE, OF COURSE, HAVE HEARD THIS BEFORE, BUT WHAT WE MAY NOT GRASP IS THIS KNOWLEDGE IS AS TRUE FOR CHURCHES AS IT IS FOR INDIVIDUALS.

THE SAME THING IS TRUE WHEN IT COMES TO THINKING OF THE LORD AS OUR KEEPER.

THE PROMISE FOUND IN THE PSALM IS THAT THAT GOD KEEPS HOLD OF US EVEN WHEN THE BURDENS OF LIFE BEAT DOWN UPON US, AND LIKE THE HEAT OF THE SUN-CAN DRAIN US OF ENERGY.

THE LORD, IS ALSO KEEPING US CLOSE TO HIM WHEN FEAR, LIKE THE CYCLES OF THE MOON, WAXES AND WANES WITHIN US.

THUS, THE PSALM ENVISIONS GOD'S HAND OF PROTECTION AND HELP FOR HIS PEOPLE WHO JOURNEY UP THE MOUNTAIN.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THOSE TIMES WHEN THE PATH CANNOT BE TRAVELED BY US BECAUSE IT IS EITHER IMPOSSIBLE TO CLIMB, OR WE ARE JUST NOT ABLE TO CLIMB IT?

THIS BRINGS TO MIND THE CHORUS OF AN OLD SONG, WHOSE VERSES SPEAK ABOUT TROUBLES IN LIFE THAT HAVE BEEN OVERCOME- OR PASSED THROUGH.

THEN THE CHORUS DECLARES THE SINGER'S DILEMMA: "BUT THIS TIME LORD, YOU GAVE ME A MOUNTAIN.

A MOUNTAIN YOU KNOW I'LL NEVER CLIMB. IT ISN'T A HILL ANY LONGER, YOU GAVE ME A MOUNTAIN THIS TIME."

MANY OF US MAY HAVE EXPERIENCED SOMETHING LIKE THIS, IN THE PAST, OR ARE IN A SIMILAR KIND OF SITUATION RIGHT NOW.

AND PERHAPS THIS CONGREGATION MAY FEEL AS IF THEY FACING AN UNCLIMBABLE MOUNTAIN AFTER I LEAVE/

WHAT THEN DO WE DO WHEN WE KNOW THE CLIMB IS BEYOND US, AND WE WONDER WHY GOD HAS ALLOWED US TO BE PUT IN THIS SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION?

THE OPENING AND CLOSING LINES OF THE PSALM OFFER DIRECTION, COMFORT, AND INSPIRATION.

"I LIFT UP MY EYES TO THE HILLS. FROM WHERE WILL MY HELP COME? MY HELP COMES FROM THE LORD WHO MADE HEAVEN AND EARTH.

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 ON AND FOREVERMORE."

THUS WE ARE REMINDED TO LOOK TO GOD, AND FIND COMFORT IN THE LORD'S EXPANSIVE AND ABUNDANT CONCERN AND CARE.

TRULY, THE PSALM INSPIRES THOSE WHO ARE OPEN TO ITS MESSAGE TO GIVE THEMSELVES OVER TO GOD'S CARE, BY DOING WHAT THEY CAN AND LEAVING THE REST TO GOD.

ANOTHER ASPECT OF DOING THIS IS ACCEPTING THERE ARE TIMES GOD DOES NOT INTEND US TO CLIMB A MOUNTAIN, AND THIS CAN BE WHEN TRUST BECOMES HARDEST.

AND YET THE LORD CALLS US TO TRUST IN HIS LOVE AND WILL EVEN WHEN IT IS DIFFICULT.

THERE IS ANOTHER METAPHOR THAT MAY BE USEFUL WHEN WE THINK ABOUT BEING IN A SITUATION WE DO NOT LIKE.

AN OLD SAYING GOES SOMETHING LIKE THIS: I PRAYED FOR GOD TO CHANGE THE WINDS OF ADVERSITY, AND THE LORD TOLD ME TO CHANGE THE DIRECTION OF MY SAILS INSTEAD.

THE MESSAGE, OF COURSE, IS FOR US TO TRUST IN THE LORD, AND WORK WITH GOD EVEN WHEN THE MOUNTAIN IS TOO DIFFICULT TO CLIMB, OR THE WIND IS BLOWING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION.

THE PROMISE OF SCRIPTURE THAT GOD WILL HELP US AND KEEP US ALWAYS IS SEALED IN THE BLOOD OF JESUS OUR SAVIOR WHO CAME INTO THE WORLD FOR THAT PURPOSE.

MAY WE NEVER FORGET THE SOURCE OF OUR HELP, AND MAY THE LORD OUR GOD BLESS US ON OUR LENTEN JOURNEY AND ALWAYS.

I CLOSE BY SHARING SOME WORDS OF AN OLD HYMN THAT SPEAK ABOUT THE LORD AS OUR KEEPER IN ITS OWN UNIQUE WAY.

"JESUS SAVIOR, PILOT ME OVER LIFE'S TEMPESTUOUS SEA; UNKNOWN WAVES BEFORE ME ROLL, HIDING ROCK AND TREACHEROUS SHOAL; CHART AND COMPASS COME FROM THEE; JESUS SAVIOR PILOT ME." AMEN

SERMON SUMMARY: PSALM 121 & John 3:1-17

NICODEMUS, WHO WAS TROUBLED. HIS PROBLEM WAS A RABBI FROM GALILEE. YOU SEE, HIS WORDS AND MIRACLES POINTED TO A MAN SENT FROM GOD, WHO WAS PERHAPS, THE MESSIAH.

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