

8) THE PILGRIMAGE OF LIFE (Psalm 121)

One of the high points in "The Sound of Music" is when the Von Trapp's flee their native Austria. When they are hid in a convent, Maria exclaims in King James English: I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help! Inspired by this confident affirmation, the Von Trapp's slip away and cross the border into the Swiss Alps.

All psalms can have numerous, flexible interpretations, yet not all interpretations are equally faithful to the text. Some limitations should be applied. Two questions need to be asked about this psalm. 1) What was the original setting? 2) What picture of God underlies it?

SETTING

a) The title of the psalm is: "A Song of Ascents." Psalm 122: 3-4, Psalm 24:3, Ezra 7:9 also give us a clue. There is reference to a ritual journey to Jerusalem, to the temple or the sacred site of the temple. Perhaps Psalm 121 and related psalms are used by pilgrims as "travel songs", on their journey to Jerusalem, ascending to the holy city. Indeed, psalms 120-134 are all "songs of ascent." Pilgrims would make their way to Jerusalem from different parts of the world during one of the high holidays like Passover.

The songs are not cries of distress. Maria Von Trapp could have used psalm 3, 7 or 142. Traveling to the holy city and celebrating a specific festival could last for weeks. Thus, the Old Testament refers to festival "seasons."

In the lectionary (biblical readings in worship chosen for each Sunday of the year in common by all Christian churches), Psalm 121 is placed in late October, just before Advent. Thus, this psalm could be thought of as a pilgrim song of the church in spiritual preparation for the weeks leading up to the celebration of Christmas.

b) But beyond the "ascents" title, the body of the psalm offers us clues as to the original setting. There is a shift from the first person pronoun (I, my – 1-2), to the second person pronoun (you, your – 3, 5-8). This offers us a clue that the psalm was used as a worshipful responsive chant. It was probably uttered either as pilgrims started the journey to Jerusalem or as they left the temple and made their way home. The first part – 1-2,4 – seems to be voiced by one pilgrim representing all, and the second part is a response by another voice, or set of voices. Could the second part be a response by the priest as pilgrims are leaving the temple? We can only speculate.

c) Today we continue to nurture faith through rhythms and festivals that span the Christian year. Through the seasons of Lent and Advent, the holidays of Christmas and Easter, we are following the pattern of ancient Israel and our seasons and holidays correspond to theirs. Faith is strengthened when we are invited to get close to God at specific times and in specific ways, following the life and work of Christ in the church year.

A PORTRAIT OF GOD

What picture of God are we given in this psalm?

Maria's utterance implies that help comes from the hills. But hills probably had a negative meaning. They were dangerous territory filled with bandits, or else, they were filled with shrines dedicated to different gods and hence they were foreign turf. Where will my help come? Not from the hills. Help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. Psalms 124: 8 repeats this message and 134, which rounds out the collection, provides a strong message of assurance to Israel. The Lord is greater than all other gods, and therefore, there is nothing to fear ultimately.

What are the hills in our own world today? Where are the threats to our own life? Is it broadly in our global world with environmental degradation, threat of a pandemic, global financial instability, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, etc... Or is the threat more personal in our relationships, illness, financial insecurity, etc. Do we truly believe that God is greater than any threat in our lives, that whatever may happen, God can bring us through to the other side?

Vs. 3-5 tells us that God never sleeps, and is a constant 'keeper' of God's people. Many of the gods of peoples surrounding Israel were related to harvest and other seasons of the year. Often they slept or died during the seasons when growth did not take place. Clearly, the message here is that Israel's God is not like that. God never 'slumbers' and never stops watching over them. In terms of the rhythm of the psalm as it would be sung, it is like a question and answer which makes some important statements about God: Does Israel's help come from the God of the hills? No, but from the God who made heaven and earth. Does God ever fall asleep like other gods? No! The God who keeps Israel never slumbers.

The parallelism is also helpful to make the point. The God of heaven and earth is also "my help." The God who keeps Israel is also "your keeper". The God of all is also my God.

The last 4 verses offer more interesting images of God. vs.5 refers to God as a "shade" who provides comfort for a traveler in the heat of the Palestinian countryside. But as in psalm 36:7 and elsewhere, God's "shade" or "shadow" is equated with the shelter and safety of the temple, which is the seat of God's reign over the whole world. God as "shade" leads to God as King who has power to rule, shelter and protect.

Vs. 6 points to difficult travel conditions. The sun by day oppresses the traveler with heat and the threat of dehydration. The moon by night is related to the ancient belief of the adverse effects of the moon and the threat of rival deities. Travelers who trust in the Lord, however, are safe under God's never slumbering watchfulness.

Vs. 7 – affirms with confidence protection from all evil. Both the coming in to the holy city and the going out from it.

MODERN DAY TRAVELERS

Life today is often described as a journey. Is faith not also part of such a journey? Are there false gods competing for our devotion and trust? Are there threats to our lives, threats that are personal to us, but also threats that are part of being human beings with all the vulnerability and limitations we must contend with?

This psalm tells us that God who is the maker of heaven and earth is greater than all other gods and all threats. We are also told that our God is always present, never absent or asleep, even though we may sometimes question such presence. Maybe it's not so much whether God is present but how God is present. It may be that through every trial and tribulation, every threat and fear that fills us with dread, worry and uncertainty, we are challenged to remain devoted to God and open to how God may become present to us in a way we have not known before.

Maria Von Trapp's interpretation of Psalm 121 is both wrong and right. She reads it as a call for help from the Lord, and even if the original intent is misunderstood, God's help is a constant theme in the psalms.

Frederick Buechner, a Christian writer, tells of his story before he became a Christian. He was at a low point in his life, depressed and saw little hope for the future. As he was driving one day he saw a car ahead of him with a license plate that said: "Trust." He took this as a sign from God and placed his life totally in God's hands. As he did this the depression he had been suffering slowly left him and he went on with his life. Later he found out that the car with that license plate belonged to a neighbour who was an investment banker, who didn't have God in mind at all with that plate. Yet, Buechner learned that God can speak to us, and build our faith through any means, even the least likely.