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Psalm 121 – *A Magnifying Glass*

Over the years I have deeply resonated with the image of our entire lives being a journey. A journey with hills and valleys, high and lows, places of grief and pain, and places of intense joy and celebration. Journeys, life journeys, we can look back on, reflect on, reminisce about, and give voice to the miles we have tread underneath our toes. These are journeys we can also look towards and dream of the places we are heading, and embrace the next step in the journey.

We are on a journey this season of Lent. Our journey will take us through biblical lectionary texts that highlight stories that call us to conversion and to new life. However, this is not necessarily a “smooth four lane highway type” of journey. Instead the common imagery of Lent is that of the wilderness - a space where the familiar is stripped away as we face our brokenness and our need for a Savior.

This morning we have been focusing on Restore us, O God! We wonder. Hmmm, what do you wonder about? As adults I think we often are more confident in proclaiming what we know and believe instead of engaging in the act of wondering. Now, on the other hand, kids do wonder really, really well. I wonder, why is the sky blue? I wonder what will happen when I try to balance this cup of water on my head? I wonder, where does the moon go during the day? I wonder, how does this airplane stay up in the air? I wonder, what it would be like to hold an octopus. Do you think it would be squishy or sticky? Welcome to my world. ☺ Wonder.

Wonder can be used as either a noun or a verb. In my illustrations it was used more as a verb highlighting curiosity and desire to know or understand something. Webster reminds us that it may also be a noun meaning a cause of astonishment or admiration, or the rapt attention or astonishment at something awesomely mysterious or new to one’s experience.¹ Today we desire

to engage with wonder as both a verb that highlights our curiosity of God and God's activity, as well as our wonder of amazement that God, the maker of heaven and earth, is watching over us on this journey. We wonder? We experience wonder!

This morning we begin by looking at this very familiar psalm, Psalm 121. This is a psalm for sojourners. Sure we could apply it as we take a trip, or a vacation, however, this morning I want to challenge us to consider how we can apply it to our life journeys and our journey through Lent.

Psalm 121 is in the section of Psalms known as the Pilgrim Songs, songs which would have been utilized by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to the temple or to attend one of the religious festivals. It is also called a Psalm of Ascent as pilgrims in route to Jerusalem, especially from the north and east, would face an ascent of nearly 4,000 feet. Not only would they face an ascent but the long journey would take them through wilderness and barren hills. The road was long and the road was dangerous. Not only did they fear the attack of beasts and animals, but they feared the attack of bandits who would lie in wait alongside the road. In the New Testament we are even reminded once again of how dangerous the journey along this road can be. In Luke chapter 10 we find the familiar story of the Good Samaritan who while on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho comes upon someone who had fallen into the hands of robbers.

It is out of the reality of the presence of potential danger that the psalmist begins the psalm with a question born out of their **anxiety**. "I lift up my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from." Perhaps when you see beautiful, amazing mountains, your first inclination is not to feel danger for what lurks out there, nor to experience a deep weariness as you think of the miles you have yet to go to cross the barren mountain chain. Instead perhaps you look at the mountains and experience a sense of wonder and awe that leads to a sense of inner peace and

quiet joy in the beauty that surrounds you. For eight years I lived in Harrisonburg, Virginia after living my entire life in Ohio, flat Ohio. However, after living in Harrisonburg for 8 years I realize now that the mountains no longer wowed me. In fact most days I would hustle and bustle around the area and did not even notice the presence of the mountains.

Well for those who were making the journey to Jerusalem, they did not look at the mountains and see something normal or even more extreme mundane. Nor as they looked at the mountains did they see a well-constructed highway which would carefully navigate them over the mountain in their nice, climate controlled vehicles. Instead they saw an opportunity for danger, destruction, death, and temptation to worship other gods.

It is imperative that we realize the background to the psalm and the context in which it was written. Without the background we can make the question, this question of deep anxiety and fear, simply a rhetorical question which has a nice poetic nature about it. So, I lift my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from? And without the background, without knowing the real danger which was present when they in fact looked at the mountains, we can turn it into a rhetorical question, undermining the anxiety that is present and move right into the confident answer in verse two. “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” However, as we sit with the reality of those on the journey, the confident answer in verse two speaks more loudly and more profoundly as a voice of security and trust.

This question born from anxiety and fear is met with a confident answer in verse two. It is important to note that part of the voice of security and trust is based upon the understanding and proclamation that our Lord is the Maker of heaven and earth. The activity of the Creator extends beyond the creation of the world, as our creator God continues to act because our God is a living God. We stand with wonder.

The rest of the psalm goes on to further expound upon the trust that our help comes from the Lord. As the psalmist expounds they repeatedly utilize the Hebrew word ‘samar’ in verses 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8. This word, which can be translated as ‘watch over’ or ‘guard’ describes a basic activity of God. So repeatedly we are reminded that on our journey God is watching over us and that this truth should be comforting to us. Not only does our God keep watch over us, but in verses three and four we are reminded that our God does not slumber nor sleep.

Those on the journey in Psalm 121 would have been aware of the vegetation gods of Israel’s neighbors who slept during the winter months and had to be woken up in seasons of planting and harvest. In contrast, our God is always awake and alert keeping watch over us. The psalm goes on to joyfully remind us that our God will be our shade at our right hand so that neither the sun nor the moon could harm us. Those on the journey to Jerusalem were in danger of sunstroke during the day and they were aware of the superstitions about the power of the moon at night. The psalm ends by proclaiming that the Lord will keep you from all harm and that the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. Wow, we wonder how God does this all. And we experience wonder that God does this all!

The psalmist repeats the truth of God’s caring attribute of watching over us on our journeys. The question is though, are we watching God? Or perhaps I should state it more open ended – on what or whom do we place our eyes as we look for help on our journey?

As we think about our own life journeys we can easily become overwhelmed as we look at the potential or real mountains before us. We could see mountains of medical treatments, higher education, mountains to climb following broken relationships, or broken dreams. Mountains of unknown land and people as you are not sure the direction you or your family are headed. Mountains of financial stress of how to make ends meet. Mountains of moving your

family to another part of the country, or embracing retirement, or downsizing your home. Mountains that seem to grow in your vision as you consider the pain, disappointment, grief, or failure of your own life. Or perhaps you just look at your life journey and at times are so overwhelmed with all that is needed to be done, or how different your life is from what you had once dreamt it would be.

The psalmist begins by recognizing that the mountains are present. The psalmist doesn't ask for God to remove the mountains, to remove the challenges, to somehow click their heels and be home. But instead, the psalmist asks "Where does my help come from?" It is more the psalmist is saying, "I can't do this alone. I am tired, I'm weary, I'm scared, I'm alone, I'm afraid. How can I go across these mountains... I have deep anxiety and fear. Where does my help come from?" And the psalmist lifts their eyes and asks the question.

Where does your help come from on your journey of life? If we were to ask our culture where does our help come from, they will tell us too look inside and find our inner strength and inner resolve to push forward to succeed and to be all that we can be as we move up the corporate ladder of our lives. Just think of some of the popular advertising slogans over the years - Energizer bunny – just keep going and going and going. Or Nike, Just do it. Or Burger King, have it **your** way. Or Sprite, obey **your** thirst. Or Allstate, **you** are in good hands. Or Starbucks double shot. Bring on the day. We are bombarded with messages all around us that state that we can do it alone, and that in fact we should do it alone. And yet, our scripture today urges us to look up from ourselves, to look up from our present problems, to look up from our present dreams, to place our eyes on the one who never slumbers or sleeps, the one whose eyes are on us. Our prayers shift to asking God to become magnified in our life, and to allow other things to recede from our vision.

I remember lazy days of summer when my family would visit my grandparents. Some of the best memories are when my older cousins from Wabash, Indiana would also be there. These cousins were into bugs and dirt and exploring, and to successfully do that they brought along their tools. One of the important tools I was introduced to was a magnifying glass. We would travel around the backyard and barn looking for bugs or little critters and then stop to inspect them under the glass. It was amazing what we could see that we couldn't just see with our eyes! I remember being a young child and being filled with wonder at the majesty and beauty of the wings of a butterfly, or the depth of colors of the eyeballs of a fly.

What's intriguing and wonder producing about a magnify glass is how and what it magnifies whatever you are trying to focus on. The item in focus becomes bigger and more defined as it stands out in your vision. At the same time everything around it becomes a little fuzzy with those items no longer being in focus.

I believe that this psalm is asking us to consider what is in our magnifying glass as we travel this journey of life and this journey of Lent. What are we focusing on? What or whom do we turn to for help and comfort as we face the mountains? Can we, like the psalmist, declare that our help, our focus, is on God, the maker of heaven and earth? Psalm 121 highlights God's attribute of watching over us. What attribute of God needs to be magnified in your life? God's trustworthiness, patience, gentleness, steadfast love, being all-powerful, faithfulness, graciousness, wisdom, joy.

Focusing on these attributes of God within our magnifying glass means that other false gods and idols become blurry. Those on the way to the temple, or back to their home, would have passed by the worship sites for other foreign gods. What are the false gods and idols that try to overwhelm our magnifying glasses? What are the crutches that we turn to in our anxiety and

fear instead of turning to, dwelling on, and trusting the attributes of our God? Are they things such as self-reliance, control, pride, social media, shame, self-help books, addictions, friends, family, (have I named yours yet?!), popular TV show hosts, the news, protective security, finances, more education, fear, the gift of being able to ‘google’ anything, and the list goes on and on. What are our false idols and gods?

For our song of response I am going to play a song from a Christian group called We are Messengers and the song is appropriately called *Magnify*. I see this song as a modern retelling of the themes of Psalms 121. The song highlights our need to open our eyes to God, and for God to be magnified in our life while other things fade. I especially appreciate the bridge of this song that prays: God be greater than the worries in my life; be stronger than the weakness in my mind; be louder, let your Glory come alive, be magnified.

As you listen to these words I invite you to consider which attribute of God you need to have magnified in your life. And what are the false gods and idols in your life that need to be moved out of focus?

ⁱ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wonder>