

Sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Athens GA

July 5, 2015

Praying the Psalms: Lifting our Eyes

Psalm 121 “I lift up my eyes to the hills...and forevermore.” Amen.

The mother of my best friend from growing up in Athens had a degenerative neurologic disease which rendered her bed-ridden for all the years I knew her. Psalm 121 was her favorite; it gave her comfort and strength. It is a favorite for many people, one of my top5. Recently, I prayed this psalm for a COM devotional and for my husband’s family on a journey to bury his uncle in NC.

We all have goings and comings: life and death, transitions in life and in ministry, people come and go throughout our lives. Life itself is a journey, a pilgrimage. And if we know that God is the source of all that is, that God is our guide and our help, we lift our eyes to God for all the help we need whenever we need it...we pray!!! The Psalter (book of the psalms) is the prayer book for the Jewish people; their Sabbath (day of prayer and rest) begins at sunset on Friday--their evening service comes before their morning prayer... night then day...goings & comings. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, going out old year, bringing in new, begins with the opening anthem, Psalm 121. It is a call for prayer.

It is a psalm of trust, an expression of absolute confidence in God who will not let your foot stumble...on the rough paths, with rocks & obstacles--on the pilgrim’s ascent to the Temple in Jerusalem, a hard road as is the road through life in ascent to the heavenly Jerusalem. He will not let your foot stumble: Psalm 91 (11-12) guards all your ways. Text Jesus quoted when tempted by Satan in the wilderness.

Let’s pause for a moment & focus on the Hebrew word “*shamar*” which means to guard, watch, (NRSV) keep. It is a verb meaning to be careful about, to protect/to preserve. “Keep” or “protect from”

...preserve...to keep/preserve your life, your soul...To keep/guard your goings out and comings in.

Last week I experienced quite a few goings and comings. I packed 2 bags, each with 2 sets of clothes (2 tunics). From Mon to Wed a group of 25 E/GPs, stated clerks, moderators, com, along with 5 denominational leaders from Louisville gathered at the retreat center of the Sisters of Mercy in St. Louis for table conversation about the going out of some of our congregations.

Talking, praying, sharing, walking, playing, singing, lifting hearts and voices, breaking bread; and then with hope, some sadness, and encouragement for the journey, we departed. I particularly enjoyed going out with 3 colleagues to the St. Louis Cardinals' baseball game. There are a lot of goings out & comings in in baseball. Then I spent the remaining days of the week at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, praying with & watching the monks coming in and going out of their choir stalls 7 times a day, singing the Psalter through their day of work and in their night of rest. Benedictines pray through the entire Psalter every 2 weeks.

And as I was preparing for today, reading various translations and annotations (scholarly notes) on this psalm, one reference was to the apocryphal book of Tobit. Dr. Doak mentioned a few weeks ago that the scroll of Esther found its way into the Hebrew Bible (by lot), but Tobit did not. In the story, Tobit encounters an angel who will guard Tobias (Tobit and Anna's son) on his journey. The angel says "I shall complete the journey with him. **Do not be afraid.** On the journey outward all will be well; on the journey back all will be well; the road is safe." Tobit said, "Blessings on you, brother!" Then he turned to his son. "My child," he said, "Prepare what you need for the journey, and set off with your brother (like Jesus' words to his disciples). May God in heaven protect you abroad and bring you both back to me safe and sound! May his angel go with you and protect you, my child!" Tobias' mother was extremely upset...in tears...very fearful. Tobit said, "Do not worry, a good angel will go with him; he will have

a good journey and come back to us well and happy.” And she dried her tears.

As noted in the New Jerusalem Bible, that God cares for us and the providence of God is with us day by day is the lesson from Tobit. Artists in the late 16th century depict the journey of the angel and Tobias. In another drawing, the same background landscape is used for the Flight into Egypt of Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus. God watched over the flight into Egypt and their safe return. “God is your shield; the sun shall not strike you by day or the moon by night.”

Psalm 121 is a blessing given to someone embarking on a dangerous journey, in the instance of a soldier going out to fight. Earlier we heard read (2 Sam5) from the story of David as military leader: “You led out Israel and brought it in.” In the Gospel narrative (Mk 6) Jesus sends out the disciples by two’s. Jesus was a Rabbi and could have offered these very words of blessings for their journey; the disciples could have sung these verses to each other as they set out in mission praying to God for help and protection.

Trust God who never slumbers or sleeps, who vigilantly watches, who is your guardian and keeper, a refuge and guide (Jerome’s Commentary). Setting out and returning, God guards the individual 24/7 at all times, and everywhere.

One commentary, Peake’-- an oldie but a goodie, suggested that the words of Psalm 121 may have been prayed by the priest at the sanctuary asking God’s divine protection on the pilgrim who, having worshipped, is about to return home.

When the events in Charleston occurred 2 weeks ago, immediately my heart reached out to this psalm. Do you think the Rev. Pinckney prayed before he died expressing the faith of the psalmist? “The Lord will guard you from all evil, will guard your soul/your life” ...Did they, who had gathered for Bible Study and prayer on that Wednesday night, who welcomed in the stranger, have faith in God Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer...Protector of Israel and their

constant guard and guide? Was there a deep sense of peace and unshaken trust and confidence in the power and goodness of God?

When faced with the reality of evil, God will protect you from everything...your going and coming. God will protect you all the time...both now and forever! Deuteronomy, final book of Torah, 28.6: “Blessed shall you be in your comings and blessed shall you be in your goings whenever and wherever you go.”

We don’t know what they thought, but God’s people are blessed to be a blessing to others. What I do know is that the surviving family members who spoke at the bond hearing that was held for the gunman, spoke words of forgiveness & love...Christian love. A daughter, a mother, a sister, a son...who also said, “No matter what you’ve done, you can find Christ.” What I heard were words spoken by Jesus; I heard a true Christian witness proclaim that all should turn to God and be forgiven. Heroes are not only soldiers, first responders & teachers who shield bodies of their students...

Heroes of the faith from Emanuel AME Church, SC, in the United States of America...a faith passed on to them and a faith they have passed on to others. An undying love, expressed in the voice and through the word of God: the angel to Tobit, “Do not be afraid”; Jesus, sending disciples to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins; Paul writing to the Christians, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

So pray and lift your eyes to God for grace in times of danger to know God is near, to know God goes with you, and to know God has a purpose for each of your lives. We have seen & heard the faith in the love of God demonstrated by Rev. Pinkney and his Bible study group.

Life is a journey, and God has a purpose for our lives. Rev. Pinkney was 41 years old, that’s the age I was when I left to begin my new life in the church. When we depart this life, whether in old age or cut down by flying bullets, know that God has a purpose. My journey is to be just where God needs me to be and to be prepared to be just

who I am and to understand what I need for any situation. And I am confident and assured that God is my guard and guide. I pray that all the gifts, situations and understandings God offers will engender a feeling of wonder and gratitude to God that God is leading me to a more sure and abiding faith in God and in God's purpose for my life and for others theirs. Lifting our eyes expresses our hope & trust in God.

“Blessed are you who hear the word and hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” (Lk 8.15)

Pray with me:

God of the covenant, in our baptism you called us to proclaim the coming of your kingdom. Give us courage, like you gave to our forefathers and mothers of faith, all who have gone before us, that we may faithfully witness to your love, your peace, and your redeeming grace, in every circumstance of life, in the name of Jesus Christ our redeemer, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.