

## Sermon for August 28, 2016 – 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

### Psalm 121 (NIV84)

#### **Theme: The LORD watches over you**

- 1) Consider his power.
- 2) Trust in his protection

*A song of ascents. I lift up my eyes to the hills-- 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.*

Terrorist attacks, Zika virus, tornadoes, flooding, crime, civil unrest . . . with all the things happening in the world, it's hard not to worry about our loved ones and ourselves. Who will keep us safe from all these perils? And then there are all the worldly influences the devil uses to try to separate us from our salvation, such as: materialism, work-righteousness, our society's redefinition of morality and intolerance towards the Gospel. Where do we find refuge from these soul destroying threats?

We find our refuge in the LORD himself: our almighty God who not only created each and every one of us, but also graciously redeemed us from our sins by the blood of his Son. He promises to walk with us on our journey through life and deliver us safely to our everlasting home in heaven. With Psalm 121 as our guide let us find comfort in our Guardian God, under the theme: **The LORD watches over you.** 1) *Consider his power.* 2) *Trust in his protection.*

Part One: Consider his power.

Psalm 121 is one of 15 “songs of ascents” found in the book of Psalms. Many theologians think that these songs were sung by the pilgrims who were on their way “up” to Jerusalem to celebrate a major festival like the Passover.

For many pilgrims the journey was long and hard. They couldn't take a car or bus. Most didn't even own horses. The people walked – sometimes hundreds of miles – so that they could see God's temple and celebrate the way the LORD delivered their ancestors from Egypt. But these celebrations were not only a remembrance of former times, but offered hope for times yet to come. Just as the LORD faithfully kept his promises in the past, so he would keep them in the future by sending a Savior who would take away the sins of the world. Being in God's house with thousands of other faithful pilgrims – celebrating the LORD's presence and love . . . this gave the people great joy. It made their difficult journey worth the effort.

The Israelites pilgrimage to Jerusalem wonderfully illustrates our life on this evil earth. God has freed us from our slavery just as he freed ancient Israel: through Jesus' life, death and resurrection he save us from our bondage to sin, death and the power of the devil. He chose us to be his own people – adopting us in Holy Baptism. We belong to him every bit as much as the pilgrims who went to Jerusalem. And we too are on a journey to God's house – his heavenly temple in his heavenly Jerusalem. Like the Israelites, we are happy to make our journey because we want to be with God.

But the ancient journey to Jerusalem was both difficult and dangerous. The pilgrims could not sleep in the nearest Super 8 or Motel 6. Many camped out in open fields – surrounded by wild animals and exposed to the elements. There was no highway patrol monitoring the roads. Bandits could attack at any moment. Who would watch over the pilgrims? Who would protect them on their journey?

The pilgrims knew! They sang: *I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from? <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.* Why does the Psalmist look to the hills for help? Because the hills he looks to are the hills that surround Jerusalem, the Holy City of God! On one of those hills stood the temple of the LORD, who created the heavens and earth. He is the one who holds back the flood and reins the tempest in. He is the one who moves mountains and causes the earth to shake. He is the one who sends the storm and commands the wind and waves. He is the one who calms the oceans, makes the spring sun melt the winter snow, brings forth the spring flowers, and watches over every sparrow.<sup>i</sup> On top of this, He has thousands upon thousands of mighty angels at his command.

Our help for our earthly pilgrimage comes from the all-powerful LORD. He will protect us from the devil, who prowls around like a lion, looking for someone to devour.<sup>ii</sup> He protects us from false teachers, those spiritual thieves and bandits who try to steal us away from Christ.<sup>iii</sup> He stands as the Good Shepherd. As we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil, for he is with us.<sup>iv</sup>

What comfort this brought the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, and what comfort it brings us! Yes, the dangers that face us are very real and very scary. And the worst part is that we often don't perceive the spiritual perils that threaten us because we don't keep watch. Praise the LORD that he is ever vigilant. He uses godly friends and relatives to warn us with His soul-saving Word. He encourages us through the Church's preaching of the Gospel and our own private meditation of the Bible. Our God is gracious and all-powerful. We can trust in his protection.

## Part Two: Trust in His Protection

Our Psalm continues: *He will not let your foot slip.* Now at first glance, someone might think that a slipping foot is such a minor thing that we might wonder why God would protect us from that. But think about this: my mom's foot once slipped on a step. That little slip resulted in bones so broken that she had to have a plate and seven screws put in her lower leg. As you can see: even a minor slip can lead to major hurt.

So also little spiritual slips can lead to major spiritual hurt. For example, a little careless word can lead to broken friendship and shattered trust. A little slip of having a one night stand can lead to unwed pregnancy and lots of worry. The Bible even goes so far as to say any minor slip of God's law in thought, word or deed makes us worthy of eternal hell.<sup>v</sup>

But God keeps our feet from slipping. How? By giving us his Word that warns us of all the temptations that threaten our soul. And if we fall into sin? Then God leads us to repent – reassuring us that Jesus has paid for every one of our sins through his death on the cross. We are forgiven through faith in him. Not only that, but God also awakens a desire in us to avoid future sin. He sends the Holy Spirit to instruct us through His Word to keep us from slipping again. And if we do slip again? Jesus is there with his forgiving love to pick us up, bandage our hurt and take away our sin so that we can continue on our journey.<sup>vi</sup>

The Psalmist continues: *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.* What a wonderful assurance this is! Just think: God has not merely assigned an angel to watch over you, the almighty LORD himself watches over you. And he is not just “keeping an eye” on you either. No, he is keeping watch: fully alert to all the danger that surrounds you. He never takes a break from this work. Day and night he keeps his vigil - protecting us from all harm and bringing relief to our sin-scorched souls.

The Psalmist writes: *The LORD will keep you from all harm-- he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.* From what kind of harm will God keep you? From every single kind there is: disease, crime, disaster, sin, temptation . . . you name it! The LORD promises to protect your soul.

“But,” someone might ask, “don't Christians suffer evil all the time? Don't some fall victim to crime and others to disease? Aren't Christians hunted every day in other parts of this world and killed for their faith? How can the Psalmist say that the LORD will keep us from “all harm” when we all experience harm at some point in our lives?”

The Psalmist can say this because the “harm” God protects us from is not physical but spiritual. God doesn't just want us to have a good life on this earth; He wants us to live with him forever in heaven. And to that end he is always working: using even the evil we experience in life to serve that good purpose. I cannot tell you how or why God does it. Only he knows. But there is one thing I can say for sure: just as a doctor might hurt his patient in an attempt to heal him, so also the LORD only allows hurt in our lives to spiritually benefit us in some way.

Why do I believe this to be true? Because the Apostle Paul writes in the book of Romans: *we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.*<sup>vii</sup> Later on he adds: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor*

*demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*<sup>viii</sup>

God will keep our souls from all harm in the sense that He will make sure that nothing separates us from His love for us in Christ. God will protect us from crime, terror and disease. And if, in his divine wisdom, he allows us to experience these earthly evils, then we can trust that he only allowed them for our spiritual good: to strengthen us in our faith as we journey through life home to His house in heaven.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: when faced with seemingly insurmountable worries and troubles, take comfort in your Guardian God. The almighty LORD himself promises to stand beside you through thick and thin - guarding you in all your ways. He uses his ultimate authority to keep us safe throughout our earthly pilgrimage. He himself accompanies us on our journey – always ready to warn, instruct and forgive. Yes, there is no need to be afraid: the LORD himself is watching over you. Consider his power. Trust in His protection. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. Job 38ff

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. 1 Peter 5:8

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. John 10:1ff

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Psalm 23:4

<sup>v</sup> Cf. James 2:10

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. 1 John 2:1-2

<sup>vii</sup> Romans 8:28 NIV84

<sup>viii</sup> Romans 8:35-39 NIV84