

Second Sunday of Lent, Gospel Year A

Our Hill to Die On, Our Help Eternal

Psalm 121

Second Sunday of Lent

Analysis by James Squire

*1 I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?*

*2 My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.*

*3 He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.*

*4 He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*5 The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.*

*6 The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

*7 The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.*

*8 The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.*



DIAGNOSIS: A Treacherous World

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Helpless

Warnings about climate change pop up everywhere, a new deadly virus rears its ugly head, minority communities speak out about police harassment, social-media users find free speech to be problematic, and inhabitants of the land God gave to his people continue to struggle with each other more than they struggle with God (“Is-ra-el”)—by no means an exhaustive list of the nightmares plaguing our world. Meanwhile, the governments of the world, traditionally tasked with maintaining a decent, working civilization are too busy finding new ways to be narcissistic, wrecking previously trusted norms and institutions.

It’s kind of hard for those in charge of the store to calm our fears when they too are a living a nightmare, though they do excel at off-loading some of that nightmare onto their already over-burdened populace. Even if you don’t feel the ground figuratively crumbling beneath your feet, thanks to the miracle

of cyberspace, you know places and people who do. Is there any help for this at all? If we look to the hills (v. 1), will anyone answer?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): No Keeper

Then again, is anyone looking to the hills anymore these days? Yes, some are, though the tendency is to ask for help in making my world better—fixing what I think is wrong with the world and blaming those others for it. There's probably just enough of that going on to make the rest of the world say, "To hell with the hills, or wherever it is people say God lives! I'm going to keep my feet moving in this world and search elsewhere." So they look for help from a political candidate, or a great media mogul—someone who captures our attention and makes us dream of a brand-new world. In some cases, our intent actually may be at least partially noble. For others, the intent is purely self-serving. Why not? If our leaders are going go around breaking things in the halls of governance, why shouldn't we? Maybe it really is every man for himself. Maybe there is no one keeping us (vv. 4-5) from disaster, at least no "god" anyway.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Unprotected

Despair has a way of leading us down the path of destruction in ways that are difficult to resist. Although each new hero that appears on the scene turns out to be a dud, we keep searching for a new one. It's as if we are locked into this syndrome, with no escape. We are battered this way and that (vv. 6-7) and have to fend for ourselves. Almost 50 years ago, Bernie Taupin wrote lyrics for his pal Elton John to sing that referenced a New York Times headline declaring "God is dead." As prominent as God is as a talking point in our politics these days, that lyrical phrase is still haunting. We run in place on a treacherous treadmill as if God is dead to us and we're frantically

searching amidst the evil of the world (v. 7) for a replacement. But God is not dead.

PROGNOSIS: Covered

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): A Glorious Hill to Die On

The hill to look to (v. 1) is not up in the clouds or up in space—that too is becoming a favorite place to look for heroes—but rather a solemn hill from the distant past. The Gospel lesson for this Sunday speaks of the Son of Man being lifted up—“just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness” (John 3:14)—so that “whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:15). Notice, our psalmist “lifts up [his] eyes to the hills” and comes away only with a question: “from where will my help come?” (v. 1). We mistakenly assume that whatever help the Bible talks about must be “up there somewhere.” But looking up to space or to center stage or to the halls of government or any of the other places we look to for glorious heroes is missing the point: “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (v. 2). In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ glory is to be lifted up on the cross on Calvary to be crucified and to say, “It is finished” (John 19:30)—namely, evil’s war on God’s creation is done for. It is kaput. This is how the Son of Man comes into his glory, by dying on a small hill. This is the hill for all of us to look to for help. Our help is not some lofty visionary or spectral body. Our help is grounded in the very chaos and destruction that rears its ugly head all around us these days. “He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber” (v. 3).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Kept by the Lord

And how does this help us? A modest proposal: sing this Psalm.

"My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (v. 2). The composer of this Psalm breathes out the faith that he has breathed in, the faith that sustains him. His cry in this verse is a cry of victory, of grabbing hold of the victory that was won for him by his maker. For us, that victory was made manifest in Jesus the Christ in his death and resurrection. For the Psalmist, this was merely a promise. For us, this is a sacred story handed down from generation to generation. In a way, we both are referenced in Jesus' famous retort to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). Of course, our Psalmist had even less evidence to go on than we have. We have a completed story. He had only a promise. Such is the power of this faith that is our help in times of stress and worry. "The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night" (vv. 5-6). The elements are not against us, for they too were made by our "help."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): All the Help

And now, we represent that "help" to a world that doesn't even know where to look anymore. Governments will likely continue to self-destruct. Movements will come and go, wax and wane. Apostasy (at least in the eyes of the author of the final book of our Bible) will continue to rear its ugly head. Prominent religious institutions will point to false messiahs and instruct us to look there for our help.

And what are we to do in the face of this? Should we counter-program the noise—cast ourselves as a new kind of hero, much better than the other ones floating around these days? Heck, no! (Some might sarcastically quip, "That's how we got our latest 'hero' a little over 3 years ago.") Should we present a more sophisticated, thoughtful version of that brash hero—someone

with “real substance” this time? No.

Instead, we “sing” this Psalm to the world in the way we live in the world, and the way we care for the world. Moreover, we are commissioned to be that help—helping people keep their footing (v. 3), praying for them day and night (v. 4), helping them navigate the destructive world (vv. 5-6), and even working to guard them from evil and keep their life by relying on the death and resurrection of our Lord who died on that hill. And perhaps even, at times, dying on that hill ourselves, for them.