



A SERMON BY  
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*MARINERS' CHURCH OF DETROIT*



## THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

JULY 10, 2016

*“I LIFT UP MY EYES TO THE MOUNTAIN: FROM WHENCE WILL COME MY HELP?”*

THE PRIEST SHOULD ANSWER:

*“THY HELP COMES FROM THE LORD, MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH.”*

THIS PRIESTLY ANSWER REPRESENTS THE VERY CENTER OF ISRAEL'S FAITH IN THE AVAILABILITY OF DIVINE HELP, SUFFICIENT FOR EVERY HUMAN NEED. THE HELPER OF THIS NEEDY ISRAELITE WORSHIPER IS THE MIGHTY CREATOR OF THE WORLD.

THE NEEDY AGAIN SPEAKS. HE IS CLEARLY IN DANGER. A SINGLE SLIP, ONE FALSE STEP, MIGHT DESTROY HIM. MOREOVER, HE NEEDS DIVINE SHEPHERDING CARE, THE DEEP CONCERN OF ONE WHO IS ALERT, ON THE WATCH, AND WHO STAYS AWAKE ON HIS BEHALF, FEELING RESPONSIBLE FOR HIM.

SO THE SUPPLIANT PRAYS:

*“MAY HE NOT PERMIT MY FOOT TO SLIP: MAY HE NOT BECOME DROWSY WHO KEEPS ME.”*

AND WITH CERTAINTY COMES THE PRIEST'S ANSWER, WHEREIN THE LORD IS CALLED BY ONE OF THE NOBLEST TITLES OF ISRAEL'S GOD:

*"SURELY THE KEEPER OF ISRAEL WILL NEITHER DROWSE NOR SLEEP."*

PSALM 121 IS CATALOGUED BY MANY OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARS AS ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL IF NOT THE MOST BEAUTIFUL OF THE SO CALLED PILGRIM COLLECTION OF PSALMS. IT IS ONE OF MY FAVORITE PSALMS BECAUSE IT WAS READ DUTIFULLY EVERY NIGHT BY THE GRANDMOTHER WHO RAISED ME.

THE PSALM IS CAST IN LITURGICAL FORM. THAT IS TO SAY IT FITS PERFECTLY IN THE LITURGY EITHER AS A SERVICE OR AN ADDENDUM. INTERESTINGLY, THERE ARE SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES AMONG THE THEOLOGIAN'S ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF THE PSALM. ONE CAMP FEELS IT IS A DIALOGUE BETWEEN A PERSON AND HIS SOUL; WHILE OTHERS BELIEVE IT IS A DISCUSSION BETWEEN A PRIEST AND LAY PERSON OR A GROUP OF PILGRIMS AND THEIR SPIRITUAL LEADER. REGARDLESS OF ORIGIN, THIS IS JUDGED TO BE ONE OF THE FINEST SCRIPTURAL STATEMENTS ABOUT OUR GOD AND HIS IMPACT ON OUR LIVES.

THE PSALM POINTS TO A SITUATION OR AN OCCURRENCE OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE. HOW APPROPRIATE SINCE YOU'VE HEARD ME SAY, HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO WORK AND WORSHIP

OUTSIDE THESE WALLS. THE PSALM WAS INSPIRED BY AN ACTUAL SITUATION WHICH THE PSALMIST HAS WITNESSED OR SHARED. LIKELY IT OCCURRED ON THE PILGRIMS REGULAR TREK TO JERUSALEM. THE TRAVELERS OFTEN CAMPED IN DESERTS OR OTHER ARID AREAS. THEY FACED BANDITS WHO WERE ALL TOO WILLING TO DEPRIVE THEM OF THEIR FOOD AND VALUABLES. AS A RESULT THEY HAD TO POST GUARDS. THE WRITER OF PSALM 121 SHARES A STORY THAT ONE OF THE PILGRIMS LOOKED UP AT SUNSET AND SAW ON A HILL AN IMAGE OF THE LORD: A FIGURE STANDING GUARD OVER HIS PEOPLE.

PALESTINE IS A HILLY COUNTRY. THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF REFERENCES TO HILLS IN SCRIPTURE AND MANY DESCRIPTIONS OF THE EVENTS WHICH OCCURRED ON THE HILLS. FOR EXAMPLE ON MOUNT SINAI, TRIBES ENTERED INTO COVENANT WITH GOD. MOSES WAS OFTEN CALLED BY GOD TO HIGH PLACES, HILLY COUNTRIES AND EVENTUALLY DIED THERE. WITH THIS BACKGROUND, LET US TURN TO THE PSALM ITSELF AND ITS SIGNIFICANT VALUE TO FOLLOWERS OF OUR LORD. VERSES 1, 2 AND 8 ARE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THESE WORDS AND TAKING THE PSALM TO HEART. VERSE 1..."I LIFT UP MY EYES TO THE HILLS FROM WHERE IS MY HELP TO COME." THE WRITER PHRASES THE VERSE TO ALL AND ANSWERS QUICKLY IN VERSE 2. "MY HELP COMES FROM THE LORD, THE MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH." THESE TWO VERSES ARE A FITTING AND HELPFUL OPENING TO THE MEANING OF THE PSALM. I LIFT UP MY EYES TO THE HILLS...BUT A VERY PERTINENT QUESTIONS

REMAINS. THE PSALMIST POINTS TO THE LORD AND REMINDS US THAT THIS IS GOD'S EARTH. HE MADE IT BUT HE ALSO CREATED ANOTHER COMPONENT, THE HEAVEN TO WHICH THE PILGRIMS AND WE ASPIRE. HE DOES NOT ALLOW US TO FORGET.

IN THE REAL CORE OF THE PSALM, THERE IS MUCH VALUE BETWEEN THE OPENING AND CLOSING LINES. VERSE 8 STATES "THE LORD SHALL WATCH OVER YOUR GOING OUT AND YOUR COMING IN FROM THIS TIME FOR EVERMORE." SOME STUDENTS OF THE PSALM FEEL THIS VERSE PROMISES US PROTECTION FROM ANY TYPE OF DIFFICULTY. I DO NOT AGREE. GOD DOES NOT PROTECT US FROM SADNESS; HE MAY NOT DELIVER US FROM HARM. THIS QUOTE FROM THE INTERPRETERS BIBLE DOES SHOW US HOWEVER, WHAT GOD CAN DO FOR HIS PEOPLE: "AS STEPHEN WAS BEING MARTYRED BY STONING, THOUGH NOT YET DEAD, GOD SAVED HIM FROM THE SPIRIT OF HATE AND A DESIRE TO RETALIATE IN SOME WAY AGAINST HIS PERSECUTORS."

THE PSALM TELLS US THAT WE CANNOT BE SUCCESSFUL AT OUR FAITH WITHOUT PERSONAL RESOLUTION AND WE CANNOT OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES WE FACE WITHOUT COURAGE AND EFFORT. THIS PSALM IN PARTICULAR BEGINS AND ENDS WITH THE LORD. IT IS NOT A HASTILY COMPOSED HYMN FROM OR FOR THE HEBREW HYMNAL. IT TELLS US THAT IF WE ARE FAITHFUL, OUR ACTIONS ARE A RESPONSE TO THE ACTIONS OF GOD. THE

WRITER HAS ANOTHER WAY TO TEACH AND GUIDE US. HE CAN HELP BY SHOWING US HOW PEOPLE IN OTHER AGES HAVE WALKED WITH GOD. THROUGH THIS WE ARE REMINDED THAT WITH THEIR EXAMPLE WE MAY FORM SOME OF THE HABITS THE ANCIENTS SHOWED US.

THE PSALMIST HELPS US TO LOOK OUTSIDE OURSELVES SO THAT WE MAY BETTER SERVE GOD AND OTHERS. THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXCELLENT REMINDER FOR ALL OF US, PRIEST AND LAY ALIKE. SUPPOSE ONE DAY WHEN WORSHIP IS ENDED, THE PRIEST AND PARISHIONERS GATHER IN TYPICAL FASHION FOR THE COFFEE HOUR. WE HAVE SEEN, BUT NOT APPROACHED, A BROKEN PIECE OF HUMANITY WHO HAS ENTERED THE CHURCH ENVIRONS. WHEN THE MAN BEGINS TO TALK ABOUT HOW BEATEN HE IS, HOW BROKEN, AND HOW HOPELESS, IF THE PRIEST HAS NOTHING BUT PURE PLATITUDES TO SAY...HE MAY AS WELL BE SILENT. OR IF HE IS CONTENT TO REPEAT PHRASES THAT ARE REMOTE OR ARCHAIC TO BOTH THE SPEAKER AND HEARER, OR IF HIS DISCUSSION WITH THIS BEATEN PERSON IS FULL OF STANDARD JARGON, OR, AS MANY CLERGY UNFORTUNATELY DO, COUNSEL ABOUT THEIR OWN HARDSHIPS, THE PERSON WILL GO AWAY MORE SORROWFUL THAN WHEN HE CAME. BUT IF THE WORDS OF GOD AS SPOKEN IN THIS PSALM ARE SHARED, THE PERSON MIGHT WELL TAKE A NEW LEASE ON LIFE. YES, THIS IS A POWERFUL PSALM; YES

IT REASSURES US OF OUR FAITH; YES IT TAKES US OUTSIDE THESE WALLS; YES IT IS A PSALM THAT LASTS.

THE FACT IS GOD IS OUR ONLY SECURITY. THE LORD'S PROMISES DON'T FAIL US, EVEN WHEN THEY ARE NOT WHAT WE EXPECT. MANY OF US HAVE LIVED THROUGH CALAMITIES AND WARS. WE KNOW THE UNCERTAINTY OF "BEST-LAID-PLANS." ONE WRITER PUTS IT THIS WAY "YOU WILL LEAD ME BY THE RIGHT ROAD THOUGH I MAY KNOW NOTHING ABOUT IT. THEREFORE WILL I TRUST YOU ALWAYS...I WILL NOT FEAR, FOR...YOU WILL NEVER LEAVE ME TO FACE MY PERILS ALONE."

THE ABILITY TO LOVE AS JESUS LOVED IS OFTEN TIMES BEYOND ALL OF US. BUT I BELIEVE GOD WILL INDEED LEAD US IN THE RIGHT WAY WHEN WE ASK. WE CAN TRUST HIM AND BE SECURE IN HIM NOT OCCASIONALLY BUT FOREVER. AMEN.