

"Reflections on Psalm 121"
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Psalm 121

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San Dimas Community Church, UCC

One of my fondest memories is when I was about 13 years old and my mother and I went together to see "The Sound of Music." Who can forget that opening scene when Julie Andrews is running on the mountain top, singing her heart out and proclaiming "the hills are alive with the sound of music." At our own church camp, Pilgrim Pines, we see inscribed the words: "The mountains shall bring peace to the people." And today, Psalm 121 invites us to "lift up our eyes to the hills" drawing us to that place of the peace of God that passes all understanding.

We live in an uncertain and ever changing world. Of course, this is not new. From the beginning of time, we read in the Bible how families were called to be brave and go on adventures with God without necessarily knowing what their future might bring. The world of our religious ancestors was also a world of uncertainty and risk. We read about Abraham and Sarah, whose courage led them to say "yes" to God calling them to journey to a new place and make a new life for their family. Their relocation was not at all an easy task. We read about Joseph's family (the one who'd sold him into slavery) and how when a famine later left them on the edge of starvation, they journeyed to Egypt to beg for food in order to live. It must have been a scary thing to do! They didn't know what would happen to them. But there they were reunited with their long-lost brother, Joseph, who forgave them and welcomed them to the security of Egypt. Many years later, Moses came along. At first he resisted God's call. He made excuse after excuse as to why he wasn't the one to lead a bunch of slaves to rebel against the mighty Pharaoh. Uncertainty, fear, and self-preservation must have weighed heavy on the heart of Moses. If we didn't know how these stories were going to end, reading them would be terrifying to us: the balance between life and death is so precarious. These stories we read in the Bible are real cliffhangers! Life, whether now or in ancient times, has always been uncertain.

There have been times when those of us fortunate enough to live in these United States, may have developed a false sense of security about our lives. We've assumed that if we work hard enough we will have a large measure of control over what will happen to us and our families. But I imagine many of you have lived long enough and are wise enough to know this ultimately is false security. Yet, we go on trying to hedge our bets, plan for the future, stockpile our rations for a rainy day. If the last few years has taught us anything, it is that our control over our lives and well being is not always within our grasp. Money can be acquired and lost in very short order. Perhaps one can minimize their losses, but loss cannot be totally controlled. Many parts of our lives are not guaranteed to be without loss. Families break apart. Good health can turn quickly to life-

threatening conditions. Jobs are lost. So, where do we go to find a sense of peace and security? Where is our good news?

Today's psalm reminds us that, in the Bible, mountains are often places of theophany, places where God is experienced. Seekers of God over thousands of years have lifted their eyes to the mountaintops to transcend the self-centeredness that comes with trying to be OK all by ourselves. When we've reached the wisdom and understanding that our help comes from outside ourselves, we shift our inward gaze and look beyond ourselves to the Holy One who made us and loves us.

No doubt many of you within this church community have kept it going through thick and thin. I'm grateful to you and for you. You put the church first in your lives: your very presence within this worshiping community stands as a powerful witness for the rest of us to step up to the plate and offer ourselves to sustain the church for a future generation.

The security we desperately seek for our lives is rooted in our relationship with God and with each other and that relationship is made visible within a worshiping, loving, serving community. We cannot assure a long life or wealth, but the good news is that God is a God of relationships and our relationship with God and the creation God loves cannot be stripped from us at a moment's notice.

Psalm 121 is my favorite. It was the scripture read at our wedding, and I recall its words often. It is an eloquent reminder of who is in control, in whose security we trust, in whose hands we are held. It is the poetry of a loving God in relationship with trusting humanity.

Trusting God does not mean that we have all the answers neatly laid out before us. Our faith requires that we trust not in facts, but in a loving relationship with God. I like a plaque I found with these words: "I've seen enough to trust God with what I haven't yet seen." Human imagination cannot conceive the depth of the creating and loving God. Tom reminds me of this through the vastness of his knowledge of the universe and the clarity with which he states the limits of scientific knowledge. Because we know a loving God, we can take a breath and rest easier with all we haven't yet seen. We live in hope and faith and in a love that is limitless. And God created us to live in community. Even though church attendance throughout the country has declined recently, everywhere one looks, you can see people drawn to communities -- sometimes these communities are volunteer groups doing good things, or recreational places where people socialize and become friends, or governing bodies that have a common interest in their local community, or extended families that are closely knit. We are people created to live together and find in each other trustworthy sojourners.

Perhaps the community that sustains you is the family of the faithful who surround and support you each and every day. They're the people who appreciate our stories, overlook our shortcomings, laugh at our humanness, and hold our hands when the going gets rough. They share with us the struggles of parenting or caring for elderly parents. They are friends that tolerate differences and don't mind our sometimes crazy ideas. They are the people we call first when we get a diagnosis from the doctor. These families are folks that serve as the hands, the feet, the listening ear, and the heart of God for us.

Recently I spoke with a person who is interested in our church, and I said to her that we are a diverse community, and we don't always agree, but she interrupted me to say this: "You love each other and you love God, and that's what is important." Our sojourners within church keep our feet from stumbling: they are the voices that remind us of the unseen Holy, which, if we look carefully, enough is visible in the beloved ones around us and in all the beauty and greatness of nature even the hills to which we lift our eyes and hearts.

Roberta Bondi writes eloquently about the family of the faithful both present and within the communion of God, and she says that all of us, in one way or another, are held together in the memories of God. So we place our trust, our longing for security, our fears, our struggles, our pains, our hopes, our joys, and our futures into the memories of the God, who knows us completely and who loves us without beginning and without end. AMEN.