



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sue Hamilton - July 16, 2017 Sermon

One Step at a Time

Genesis 12:1-4a

As human beings we share many common denominators. There are the basic survival needs of food, shelter and water. From our birth there is the need to be loved and cared for. As we grow and develop there is the need for meaning and purpose. Coupled with this is the need for relationship, with God, and with one another. This yearning draws us to worship, stirs the quest for knowledge and understanding, the recognition and need for forgiveness, and the desire to share life with those around us. In the midst of life's unfolding moments are the enjoyment of many good gifts, the blessing of family and friends, work, recreation, the pursuit of opportunity and growth, and the beauty that surrounds us. Also present is the reality of struggle, the difficulty of hardship, sickness, the pain of suffering and the finality of loss. No human being escapes life's challenges. Such times alter our schedule and focus of energy, at the very least, and, and when powerfully intense can turn life upside down and engulf us with fear, moving us to quick action or leaving us stunned, immobilized, uncertain of which way to turn.

Perhaps fear, more than any other emotion, can suddenly turn our focus to God. In the midst of panic this turning can be immediate, simultaneous with the event, like a doctor's reflex hammer hitting the knee. There is no deliberate thought; the cry of the soul finds voice before the mind knows to ask. Other times a given difficulty allows space for thought and the settling of emotion, where alternatives can be considered before determining a choice of action. In either case, when we are afraid, we are in need of help.

People of faith often turn to religious writing in times of need. For the Christian, this includes the Bible and frequently, the Book of Psalms. Psalm 121, which I read a few moments ago, was the passage I turned to the night before my father's recent brain surgery. I read it to him, because I hoped it would offer comfort and peace, and also because I imagined the image of hills in the opening verse would be easily relatable and one he could visualize when alone. Dad, ever a promoter of his home state, West Virginia, has a great love for the rolling hills surrounding his birthplace, and I too, have inherited this affection. Whether or not he thought of this image or verse after we left that night or the in morning before we arrived, I do not know, but for me this psalm has been anchoring.

Labeled, a psalm of ascent, these verses are thought to have been a sojourner's prayer used by the Jewish people as they traveled to Jerusalem for Holy feast days. The first two verses express the

intent of the traveler, while the remaining six, voice a blessing offered by those left behind. Imagine for a moment the scene.

It is early in the morning before sunrise. Daniel and Leah are up early, dressed and eating breakfast. Recently married this is their first trip to Jerusalem together. Eager to join their fellow pilgrims, they accept the hugs and good wishes of their families. Leah smiles as her grandmother looks into her eyes and gently kisses her forehead. In her hand she places food and water for later. Ready to set out, Leah pauses as she looks up. Nudging at Daniel's elbow, she points at the hills in the distance. The teachings of childhood are suddenly palpable. Even in the early morning hour she feels her heart quicken. Words she has heard many times before find voice in her. Speaking not to Daniel or to her family Leah directs her words, her prayer, to God, "I lift my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Unaware that Daniel's voice has joined her own, she feels his fingers slip between hers, tightening their grasp. Echoing gently around them are the voices of their family, reciting the poetic words that follow, words that offer assurance of God's presence, guidance and protection, for their immediate journey and forever more.

Maybe this illustration is a little simplistic but it serves a point by allowing us to imagine the psalm's early use. Few of us go on physical pilgrimages today, but as a church and as individuals who seek to heed the call of God in our lives, we can take this image and apply it to the individual moments that comprise our smaller stories as well as to the larger journey which encompasses a lifetime. Each morning we set out not knowing what events will transpire during the day, providing opportunity to lift our eyes to the Lord. The psalmist assures the listener of God's presence and guidance. Leah and Daniel's family remind them that this love is steadfast, dependable and faithful – "he will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber." Assurance does not mean that difficulty or sorrow will not touch our lives; rather God's presence never leaves us.

Six times in six verses it is stated that God is our keeper. Robert Fisher writes, "There is a big difference between having and keeping. For instance, I might have a favorite sweater. It is my possession. However, I keep my puppy dog. He is not merely a possession; he is my beloved dog. He is dear to me. Therefore, I watch over him not for my sake, but for his. I protect him from harm because if he suffers, it hurts me too.

Likewise, God does not merely have us. God keeps us. We are God's beloved, and immeasurably dear to God. We are not merely possessions in the eyes of the Lord, because if we suffer, it hurts God too." This psalm celebrates the fact that the Lord is our keeper.¹

We may acknowledge and accept these ideas to be true, that the Lord is the source of our deepest help and the faithful keeper of our lives, but it is not until life tests us, or until we find our self, afraid, can we really appreciate these aspects of God's being.

Each of us will encounter such moments in different ways. The wall of challenge can be financial, relational, spiritual or physical, touching any aspect of health or well-being. We may be facing a tough decision, worried about a loved one's health or our own, fearful about the future and how we or our children will manage, or distressed about a relationship. Whatever it may be that makes the journey before us uncertain, causing our minds to worry and our spirit to be heavy, this psalm beckons our reading. When we realize that despite our gifts and ability we are not ultimately in charge, that there is a limit to our power to influence or to make happen, the words to this psalm can help us to let go, to release the grasp of what so tightly holds us.

Robert Fisher offers, "There is a blessing given in the moments when we become aware of our powerlessness. In a sense, these are not so much moments in which we are more powerless than usual. Rather, these are moments when we are more informed than usual about how little power we possess. These are moments when our illusion of power is stripped away and we are blessed to suffer the reality that we need help beyond ourselves. Though it is an uncomfortable realization, it is a blessing to be able to live in the truth, after all, and it provides a footing for our sincere cry to the Lord."ⁱⁱ

What feel like powerless moments can in fact open us to greater love, and enable us to appreciate beauty in ways never before noticed, in the people around us and in God's creation. To recognize our need for help and to welcome the gifts of others can broaden our thinking and awareness, our ability to understand. Powerlessness, like fear, can strip away pretense, exposing our vulnerability but also reveal the gift of our humanity. Our situation may not change, but our footing becomes more stable. Our cries to the Lord root us by naming what is important in our lives and opening us to trust in God's loving care the best that we can.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." In a world filled with instant communication, email, Instagram, twitter, and a host of apps that seek to provide everything we need at our fingertips; we may be tempted to say, "God needs an app." What if it were that easy to get divine help? God, ever present and near, dependable and faithful, is not downloadable. The Almighty's love is too sacred and wondrous to be contained.

How do we avail our self of divine help; day by day, one step at a time. Not a very satisfying answer, perhaps, but true. We avail our self to help each time we stop and pause, noticing what is going on in and around us. We avail our self to help by offering God our worship, reading and listening to the Word and to the words of others, living and in the past, who broaden and deepen our

understanding. We avail our self to help through friendship and the support and care of others. We avail our self to help by becoming engaged, noticing life's gratitude's and seeking to serve others. We avail our self to help through prayer, using words and resting in silence.

Like Abraham and Sarah we are on a journey, blessed by God and invited to travel by faith. We do not know what we will encounter along the way, the joys that will surprise and delight us or the challenges that will shape and deepen us. Spanning the gamete it is good to remember that God is bigger than whatever we face. God is with us in the day and in the night. He who keeps us and this great world in which we live, neither slumbers nor sleeps. May this hope and goodness grant us courage and gives us peace. Amen.

i Fisher, Robert W. *Feasting on the Word, Year A., Volume 2*, David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), p. 56.

ii Fisher, Robert W., *ibid.*, p. 58