

Being Kept  
Psalm 121  
Lent II: March 8, 2020  
Rev. Tim Phillips



*[Meeting online.]*

**LESSON**

One: I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?

**ALL: My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.**

One: God will not let your foot be moved;  
the One who keeps you will not slumber.

**ALL: God who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.**

One: The LORD is your keeper;  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

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

One: The LORD will keep you from all evil;  
The LORD will keep your life.

**ALL: The LORD will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and for evermore.**

**SERMON: *Being Kept***

The psalm for today starts: “I lift up my eyes to the hills.”

I remember several years ago sitting on the deck of a restaurant overlooking Lake Union. It was a beautiful sunny day and my parents were in town for their fourth visit or so. We were remarking that it was amazing, even with all the sun, that Mt. Rainier wasn’t “out.”

Unfortunately, that had been the case every time my parents had been in town and my dad would routinely say: “I don’t believe there even is a mountain.”

That day, Patrick had enough. He slapped the table and said: “That’s it. I’m taking you there.” And he loaded all of us in the car and we drove to Mt. Rainier.

Admittedly, it isn’t nearly as impressive when you are driving on it as it is seeing the mountain rising from the horizon in all its glory. But dad was at least satisfied that there probably was a mountain after all.

As a Midwesterner, I am still mystified that something that huge can just disappear. And then re-appear on the horizon like it’s playing a game of divine hide-and-seek. Whether “out” or “not out,” the mountain has its mystery.

I think about that when I hear Psalm 121: “I lift my eyes to the hills.” Sometimes, when I lift my eyes to the hills, I don’t see anything. Or what I do see is a huge obstacle in front of me. Turning your eyes toward the hills isn’t always the answer to the question: “From where does my help come?” The psalmist says, “when I lift my eyes to the hills” and wonder “from where does my help come?” I remember that “my help is from the One who made heaven and earth.”

For the psalmist, looking to the hills is not about obstacles and it’s not about God playing games with us. It is a promise that the One – the energy, the power, the mystery of life itself – that formed this earth is at work in ways that we cannot always see. Mt. Rainier is not just an example of that power. It is an expression of that power.

When Barbara Gibson, the environmental activist and poet, adapts this psalm, she says:

*I lift up my eyes to the hills.*

*Where does my help come from?*

*My help comes from creation [itself] ...*

*Sky and earth do not sleep.*

*The forces that help me*

*do not slumber or sleep.*

It’s a little uncomfortable to talk about the mystery and the power of the natural world without recognizing that Mt. Rainier could explode someday – as Mt. St. Helens did – raining down ash and lava and re-shaping the earth around us. When we look to these hills, we have to remember that their power and their mystery are as destructive as they are creative. Alone, they do not have an answer for us about why bad things happen to good people or why good things happen to bad people.

Don’t get me wrong. If I lift of my eyes to the hills I do see power and mystery and the amazing forces of nature. But that alone does not help me.

You know how I say that my understanding of God comes from Ephesians 3.20: “There is a power already at work within you that is able to accomplish far more than any of us can ask or imagine?” The help I am seeing when I look to the hills is this mysterious power, greater than any of us, at work in you in ways I cannot even ask or imagine.

So the psalmist goes on to say that this God – this energy, force, creation that made heaven and earth – is our keeper. And, in fact, if you missed it, the psalmist says it several times:

*My help comes from the One who made heaven and earth ...*

*The One who keeps Israel ...*

*The One who is your keeper ...*

*The One who will keep you from all evil;*

*The One who will keep your going out and your coming in.*

So I look to the hills and see a power greater than my own that is my “keeper.”

In these days, being “kept” doesn’t conjure up very flattering images. If we say someone is a “kept” man or a “kept” woman we usually are talking about someone who is an affront to our sense of independence and self-determination. Being “kept” can be a kind of slavery to someone else’s desires and plans and resources.

Every time we dedicate a child here at Seattle First Baptist, we sing one of pastor Rod Romney’s great hymns.

*Child of promise, child of heaven,  
To our watch-care you were given;  
We return you with thanksgiving  
To our God for your safe-living.*

And then there is that second verse:

*We release you to God's keeping*

Really? Are we actually faithful enough to release our children into God's keeping? Every time we sing this I wonder how clear we are about what we are saying. It's one thing to say that children have been given into our "watch-care" but another thing altogether to claim that we are giving our children over to God's keeping.

And I wonder if we really meant it, what kind of freedom that would give our children and ourselves. Not that we stop being responsible for "watch-care." But that releasing them into God's keeping we are freeing them and us into a power greater than ourselves – one that can accomplish far more than any of us can ask or imagine.

*We release you to God's keeping, we sing as we come around to the words of Psalm 121:*

*In your waking and your sleeping.*

*In your coming and your going*

*May you journey in God's knowing.*

"I lift up my eyes to the hills" and am reminded of a power greater than my own that keeps me not as a slave but as a one who is set free – released.

That second verse of that dedication hymn ends: "May you journey in God's knowing."

"Journey" is one of those metaphors for spiritual life that may be a little tired. We/I use it a lot because it's a reminder that life is not static. That change and change in direction happens. That the spiritual life is more than a destination.

That's all good. "Journey" is a biblical image after all.

But I wonder if we have sanitized it too much. If we have made it sound more glamorous than it is.

Look at this psalm that ends with our "going out" and our "coming in." Scholars tell us this is a journey psalm but look at what happens along the way: your path could get slippery and you might lose your footing; you could be convinced that God is definitely sleeping on the job; there are threats by day and dangers by night and evil all around.

Last Sunday afternoon, I visited the Northwest African American Museum. Since this is International Women's month, I wanted to see the exhibit of paintings by Hiawatha D called "Iconic Black Women." There was Shirley Chisolm and Michelle Obama and her girls. There was Oprah Winfrey and Beyonce. There were scientists and teachers and Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcom X, and Coretta Scott King, widow of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., standing together in the black veils and dresses of mourning.

At the end of the exhibit was a painting of Harriet Tubman, as if it all led back to her. I stood there for a long time thinking about what it took to take that first step away from slavery and toward freedom.

Hers was no sentimental spiritual journey. It was full of threats by day and dangers by night. She was surrounded by the evils of slavery. She could have been caught and killed at any moment.

I wonder what she thought when she lifted up her eyes to the hills. Did she see obstacles or a place to hide or the promise of help?

We don't know. What we do know is that she made that dangerous journey believing she was kept by the One who was bringing her to freedom. And when she crossed into Pennsylvania, she said: *When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything: the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven.*

The world looked different that day. She was different that day.

And the story didn't end there. She stayed on that dangerous journey until 300 slaves were freed. She was kept in her going out and her coming in. And when she died on March 10, 1913, it's reported that her last words were from John 14: "I go to prepare a place for you."

For Harriet Tubman, those words were both a call and a promise.

Beloved ones, this Coronavirus-19 journey we are on together right now is difficult and dangerous. It will be easy to lose our footing; to wonder if God is asleep on the job; to feel isolated and alone and held captive by forces we do not understand; to blame and judge and let old racist biases rise up again.

We may look to the hills and see the power and the mystery of majestic Rainier or we may see nothing and wonder: "So from where will our help come?"

The psalmist says, and Harriet Tubman trusted, that our help comes from knowing we are kept.

David Burns says:

*... we are not throwaways ... We can release ourselves into rejuvenating rest, partly because we know God's watchful eye and creative hand never cease ... this psalm can be about all our going out and coming in – our births and our deaths, our hellos and good-byes, our expanding and our decreasing, our risky adventures and our safe returns home.*

We can travel this journey because we are not throwaways. We are kept. We are kept in our "watch-care" of one another but, for the sake of your freedom and our own, we also "release you to God's keeping." And we can do all that in the confidence that we are on our way home.

That's the one thing that keeps me going in these days. I am kept in that call and that promise to "bring us home." Bring us through this journey and home to each other.

It means something that Harriet Tubman's last words were: "I go to prepare a place for you."

And today, if you hear that voice – that call, that promise, that hope – do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Barbara Gibson's adaptation of Psalm 121 is in her *Psalms for Troubled Times*. A short biography of Harriet Tubman can be found online at [www.biography.com/activist/harriet-tubman](http://www.biography.com/activist/harriet-tubman). The final words of Harriet Tubman were

reported at the end of the movie about her life. David M. Burns writes about Psalm 121 in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), pp.57-61.