April 3, 2011

The National Presbyterian Church

A Song for the Journey

Psalm 121

Rev. Patrick J. Willson

You see it on the Metro and you see it with American University students walking and jogging by on Nebraska Avenue: they are going somewhere and they have their ear-buds in and their iPods on because they need traveling music. They need a song for their journey.

The Psalter understands. Within the book of Psalms there are fifteen psalms bearing "the enigmatic superscription"[i] "songs of ascent." It's not completely clear what that means, but the accepted explanation is that pilgrims sang as they made their way to Jerusalem and ascended Mount Zion to worship at the Temple of the LORD. These psalms were songs for the journey, music to help you get around, a little traveling music.

One of these "songs of ascent," the one hundred and twenty second fairly bubbles with of the exuberance of

these travelers: “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’”

That psalm goes on to give us words to speak here in “the house of the LORD,” words with which we may bless each other: “For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’”

“Peace be within you,” we say. We are glad to come to worship in the season of Lent and refresh our blessing. Blessing can be misplaced, blessing can be tarnished, blessing can be lost in a world so in thrall to bitterness and curse, but we remember here that we are called to bless. It seems so much easier here, being a blessing, yet what we do here we are called to do everywhere, and the psalm knows that.

“For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good,” that one hundred and twenty second psalm ends, “For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.” That, of course, is what so many people spend so much of our time and energy doing: we seek the good of the house of the LORD, trying to make the threshold of that house a place of hospitality, furnishing that house so it may be a place of healing. We try to make the house of the LORD a *bet Midrash*, a house of interpretation. We traffic in deep meanings so people can make sense of their lives in the light of what God has done and is doing.

“For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.” We celebrate that on this Lenten pilgrimage. That’s the one hundred and twenty second psalm, but this morning I want to focus our attention on the one hundred and twenty first psalm. This is another “song of ascent,” another pilgrim psalm. It provides music for the journey. Christian spirituality has frequently spoken of “the journey of Lent.” Lent provides us opportunity to go from one place to another and the Psalter provides the music.

This one hundred and twenty first psalm, however, is not as ebullient as the one hundred and twenty second; it sings a different melody in a different key. The one hundred and twenty second psalm anticipates the happy pilgrimage—"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'"—but the one hundred and twenty first psalm appears to be a song for pilgrims departing on the journey home.

The bags are packed with some t-shirts from Jerusalem, a few items from the Temple gift shop, and now the pilgrim stands in the door of the Temple wondering, "Where now?" "From where will my help come now?"

"I lift up my eyes to the hills," sings the worshipper, and asks "from where will my help come?" I lift up my eyes to the hills, or, I lift up my eyes to the long road that spreads out before me. I lift up my eyes to everything waiting for me Monday. I lift up my eyes from the linoleum of the examining room floor to hear what the doctor is saying about the tests they ran. I lift up my eyes from my desk to see the look on the face of my colleague and recognize the depression has returned. I lift up my eyes to mid-terms and what it means for my grade point average and my hopes. I lift up my eyes to the stock market, its charting of an uncertain economy. I lift up my eyes to the city streets where people wander unemployed, unfed, unhoused, unblessed. I lift up my eyes to this torn, troubled world where peacemakers are seldom welcome. I lift up my eyes to the mirror and wonder if I have faith enough, health enough, hope enough, endurance enough for another year.

In the door of the Temple the pilgrim stands weighted down: a briefcase full of papers, reports half read and reports half written, a calendar charting more tasks to be accomplished and a few books bought in the Temple bookstore one hopeful morning that in the busyness back

home may never be read, and the pilgrim's heart sinks within: from where will my help come?

The journey is long and the way ahead is fearful—where now? From where will my help come? The journey of Lent is a journey home, but where is that?

The pilgrim seems alone and that question, "From where will my help come?" echoes with deep loneliness. As alone as the pilgrim may seem, the pilgrim does not stand alone in the door of the Temple. A priest of the LORD stands alongside.

This is a psalm for two voices, a duet for faithful people. This psalm is a gift for people concluding a pilgrimage. The pilgrim sings the first verse, the priest the remainder; the pilgrim sings the question, the priest responds with an answer. The pilgrim phrases the aching question, "From where will my help come?" the question that haunts every man, every woman, and the priest braves to speak an answer.

Whatever strange and wonderful gifts the pilgrim may have received on the pilgrimage, there is one more gift remaining to be given: a gift of words. The priest packs the pilgrim off on the journey with words to take along. In response to the pilgrim's question, "From where will my help come?" the priest declares,

"help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

God who keeps you will not slumber.

God who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."

The priest knows of a "God who keeps" and the priest repeats that phrase, "God who keeps," twice before coming to the heart of the matter, the central affirmation, the words we are given to carry on our way: "The LORD is your keeper." Those words we are given—"The Lord is your keeper—are not only the central affirmation of the

psalm; they are the center, the exact mathematical center of the poetry. One biblical scholar counted it up (don't you just love folks who would think to do this?): exactly as many syllables precede this affirmation as syllables follow it. Who knew? "The LORD is your keeper" is the poetic fulcrum on which teeter-totter our anxieties and God's assurances.

"Behind the words of the priest," declared the great German biblical scholar Claus Westermann, "we can recognize the blessing given to the worshipping congregation…in Number 6:24-26"[ii]: "The LORD bless you and keep you." Earlier, in the worship of the Temple the priest had spoken that blessing upon the pilgrims; now, in liturgies of farewell the priest gives the pilgrim a song to sing on the journey, and the name of the song is "The LORD is your keeper."

The LORD is your keeper and it has been so from the very beginning. "Help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth"—that Creator God keeps you.

God who made you keeps you.

Christ who called you into discipleship keeps you.

The Spirit who gave birth to your faith keeps you.

Your employer or your firm or your company may think they are your keeper, but they're wrong about that too. Your broker may convince you that she or he is your keeper, but if you believe that, it's a poor investment. Television commercials will persuade you that a consumer economy is your keeper and that your happiness and well being depend upon what you can buy and own, but they're lying about that too. A thousand self-help books will counsel you that you are your own keeper and it's up to you and no one else to keep yourself healthy, happy, highly effective, spiritually-centered, slim, fit and low cholesterol, but that's only more law and bad news.

Good news is what the priest standing at the Temple door gives us to sing. This one hundred and twenty first psalm is a gospel song: The LORD is your keeper and that's good news.

Read all through the Scriptures, read the whole Bible and you will find no one else named a "keeper" of human beings. As Yogi Berra said, you can look it up.

You have David named a keeper of the sheep, you have Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe in Josiah's court (2 Kings 22:12), Kore, keeper of the east gate when Hezekiah ruled (2 Chron 31-14), Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, when Artaxerxes reigned (Neh 2:8), and in Maccabees, you even have Hermon, keeper of the elephants (3rd Maccabees 5:1), but no one is ever called a keeper of people except the LORD.

A "keeper" keeps what has been entrusted to the keeper's care. The job description reads: keep it, hold it, guard it, take care of it, don't lose it or let it be damaged, don't misplace it, don't let it get lost in transit and don't let it wander away on the journey.

In the gospel of John Jesus sounds like he understands himself to be a keeper:

> *Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of the One who sent me. And this is the will of the One who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that God has given me, but raise it up on the last day.* [6:37-39]

The LORD is our keeper because we belong to God. God makes us, God calls us, God sends us and God keeps us. The LORD keeps our words because the words we are given are God's Word. "I am watching over my Word to perform it," God

tells Jeremiah. The gospel is God's idea, not ours, and God will keep it. The LORD keeps our work because the work we are given to do is God's work and that work finally belongs to God. The LORD keeps us on our journey because the journey is God's journey: it is a journey to God and in God and through God.

The LORD is your keeper, the LORD will keep your life, the LORD will keep your going out and coming in, sings the priest standing at the threshold of the journey. Like a mother wrapping up her children at the front door before they go outside into the cold, so the priest wraps the departing pilgrim in God.

Wherever you go—and the journey is long—wherever you go—and the journey is difficult—wherever you go—and the journey takes its toll on everyone of us—wherever you go, God shall find you, God shall feed you, God shall sustain you, God shall encourage you and above all, God shall keep you.

"Help comes from the LORD," declares the priest. And what LORD is that? "Help comes from the LORD who made heaven and earth."

When the world was made—the story is told among tribes of indigenous Australians—when the world came to be it was sung into being by the ancient ones or gods.[iii]

That image of creating by song enchants me. In the *Chronicles of Narnia* C. S. Lewis pictured Aslan singing Narnia to life, and just so native Australians understood that the ancient ones created heaven and earth by singing them into existence.

These songs of creation the ancient ones sang they taught their human children so that they

could teach others, and so all could be joined in the great web of creation connecting all things. The songs the ancient ones taught hold all things together in harmony and peace. When you know how to sing those songs, they say, when you know how to sing these songs you can go anywhere in the world and know where you are, you can go anywhere in the universe and not be lost.

The one hundred and twenty first psalm is a song like that. It's a song for the journey. When you know how to sing "The LORD is my keeper" you can journey anywhere, by day or by night, you can journey, and whether you are going out or coming in, and wherever you journey, far from being lost, you will find yourself enfolded again and again in God's grace and discover yourself in God's safekeeping.

---

[i] William P. Brown, *Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), p. 96.

[ii] Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms,* translated by J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p.291.

[iii] Megan McKenna and Tony Cowan, *Keepers of the Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), p. 37-38.