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**“Imagination’s Geography: Where Worship Begins”
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**Second Sunday in Lent (Year A)
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Psalm 121**

They say there are two kinds of people in the world: beach people and mountain people. This is a sermon for mountain people.

“I lift up my eyes to the hills”—for those with a love of the Appalachians or the Blue Ridge, or further out west to the Rockies, this Psalm brings to mind something more than geographic typography. If you are the mountain type, a trip west on I-40 to Montreat or Asheville is more than a welcome change in elevation and temperature—it’s akin to a spiritual pilgrimage. For some making the trip, that ascent evokes feelings of serenity and peace, once you’ve gotten beyond the traffic on the Old Fort to Ridgecrest stretch of the road. It’s something more than mere feelings: one’s imagination is engaged by a sense of stability and substance which only massive earth and evergreen, mountain laurel and babbling brook convey.

If you are a beach person, you don’t have a clue what I’m talking about. Except that beach persons have a similar experience of re-creation and renewal by hearing the roaring surf and seeing the vast expanse of ocean embracing shoreline and the wriggling of toes in the sand. So you beach people may be able to relate to this text from Psalm 121, too!

Psalm 121, so closely associated with the grandeur of mountainous terrain, is the second in a series of psalms that are called psalms of ascent. This series begins with Psalm 120 and concludes with Psalm 134. The general scholarly consensus is

that the psalms of ascent were used by pilgrims on their way to and from worship at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Worship at the Temple was mandated for Jews in certain seasons, and those who lived away from Jerusalem would travel, sometimes for days, with families and neighbors in caravan. Those traveling alone were subject to robbers or worse along isolated stretches of the journey. So people traveled as a group.

The psalms of ascent were songs of worship which the pilgrims employed as they journeyed to and from worship at the Temple. The term “ascent” is understood as progress up toward Mount Zion where the Temple was located. The pilgrimage was not only a geographical movement; it was a spiritual movement up to the profound experience of worship of God at the Temple.

In those days, worship at the Temple was a challenging effort for most, and family obligations and vocational pursuits were put on hold in order to accomplish it. And the journey could be dangerous. So important was a person’s journey to the Temple that the journey itself was counted as an act of worship equivalent to a person’s presence in the Temple. The act of preparation and travel was considered part of worship.

Now think about your trip to worship today. Did you consider your preparation for and travel to church as an act of worship? Getting the kids ready, getting out the door with everything in hand, negotiating traffic and finding a parking spot. It may not have been especially dangerous but it had its challenges.

One Sunday morning, a family with a houseful of kids was preparing in their usual fashion for church. The mother had already changed the children’s clothes twice, the three-year old just spilled juice on his shirt, and they were running late. She saw her husband with the car keys in his hand, so she grabbed the keys from him and said, “You get the kids ready. I’m going out to sit in the car and honk the horn.”

I know you have never yelled at your loved ones, fumed all the way to church, and then plastered a smile on your face while greeting your fellow worshipers at church. And for those that do, the prayer of confession can be quite meaningful.

What would happen if we considered the act of getting to church as important as worship at church? That the journey was just as important as the destination? Might our relationships with children, spouse, and other drivers on the road change, maybe even improve?

Certainly we would still experience the frustration and tension that comes with getting somewhere on a schedule. But would our attitude and receptivity in worship itself shift in positive ways because the dissonance of our relationships was diminished?

I think it would be a great experiment to adopt and implement for the remaining days of Lent an intentional approach to worship. Our preparation and travel time would be as important as worship itself. If you should adopt that experiment, I would like to hear what your experiences are: the challenges, the successes, the insight you gain.

The Jewish practice of pilgrimage to the Temple can teach us much about worship. Of course you and I are aware of Jesus' teaching that a specific location for the worship of God was not necessary. In response to the Samaritan woman at the well who asked which center for worship was the true one, the Samaritans' at Mt. Gerizim or the Jewish Temple at Mt. Zion, Jesus said that God should be worshiped in spirit and truth. Location wasn't the deciding factor; God's nature is, and that nature of spirit and truth trump location every time (see John 4:7-26).

Having said that, we are nevertheless aware of how geography or place plays a role in our perception of the nearness of God. Our imagination and memory locates God in places where we experience God's presence.

That's true for us. It was certainly true of the experiences of those recorded in the Bible.

For Jacob, it was a stone he used as a pillow where he dreamed of a ladder and heard the message of God's call. Awaking, Jacob said, "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it." And he set up his stone pillow as a memorial and called it Bethel (Genesis 28:10–22). For us, it might be the hills or a retreat center or a sanctuary or a chair where we read and pray.

Like Jacob, we are unaware of God's presence in the places we merely pass through. In many ways, these psalms of ascent remind us that all of life is a journey, and every step of our journey provides an opportunity to worship the God who goes with us and before us and behind us.

Psalm 121 begins with the resounding declaration: "I lift up my eyes to the hills." This declaration is often misunderstood and misquoted. People frequently tack on to the end of this declaration the words, "from where my help comes." It makes it sound as though the hills themselves are a place of refuge and help, and often we feel that way when we get away from the routine.

Yet the Hebrew does not say this. A very specific word structure provides the form of a question, so that it should read: "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?"

Scholars are divided about the interpretation of this first line. One scholarly perspective sees the hills as a source of threat and anxiety for pilgrims. The hills provide a variety of possible missteps: treacherous paths, wild animals, bandits.

Physical threats were not the only dangers, though. The hills provided cover for clandestine gatherings where shrines to other gods were erected and alternatives to the Jewish God were offered. These "high places" of idolatry tempted pilgrims to turn away from the true worship of the God of Israel.

When you are in a strange place surrounded by potential threats, it is understandable that people might seek an additional insurance policy for protection. If the local mountain deity promises protection from snakes during the day and a good night's sleep, why quibble over the definition of God? Cover all your bets just in case.

Today we don't recognize idolatry, although it is just as pervasive. The universal idols that have managed human fear through the centuries, we typically reject: intolerance, fear-mongering, xenophobia. Our local deities go by more acceptable names such as opposing socialism and enforcing our borders and national security and voter ID.

When confidence is eroded in the God we worship, it is not long before we turn against each other. If we yell at our loved ones on the way to church, just imagine what might happen at a public forum to voice differing opinions.

“My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.” This affirmation of faith rejects the worship of creation and human sources of confidence. Instead it centers all of life upon God.

The question asked by the psalmist provides the pivotal issue of human life in the context of faith. “From where will my help come?”

The psalmist is clear. “My help comes, not from creation or things carved by human hands—my help comes from the Creator, the Lord who makes all things in heaven and earth.” This is the point on which everything turns for people of faith.

Psalm 121 details the confidence that God’s people can place and have placed in the One who steadies footsteps along the path, who never grows weary, who overshadows during blazing noonday heat and protects from the conspiracies of the darkness.

I have no doubt that Psalm 121 serves as an affirmation of confidence for American soldiers on patrol in the distant places around the globe. I am equally confident that parents and spouses and children and siblings cling to those words on behalf of their loved ones. Personal danger from war or illness or natural disaster or just plain human meanness are swept up in this unwavering statement of faith in God found in Psalm 121.

However, regarding such a truth as merely a personal and private comfort is a great temptation and limitation. The psalmist understands that worship enlarges our horizons rather than narrows our interests.

In Psalm 121, there is a fascinating interplay between the personal and the community. The language begins with first person singular: “I lift up my eyes; my help comes from the Lord” and moves to second person plural: “He will not let your foot be moved; the Lord is your keeper.”

What begins as a personal benefit of God’s goodness is enlarged to include others. God’s protection and goodness breaks the boundaries of me and mine and ours; it pushes outward to engage the entire world. If God looks out for my interest and needs, then God must be looking out for my neighbor’s interest and needs as well. And if my neighbor is having difficulty, then my obligation is to be an instrument of God’s care in his or her life.

The confidence in God’s ultimate care that initiates the human act of worship quickly spreads beyond one’s self to embrace every aspect of life. How we worship impacts our human relationships and therefore our ethical life. Worship influences:

- with whom we share the Good News of grace;
- how we attend the elderly and infirm;
- the integrity of our business practices;
- the tone and grace of our civic discourse;
- the welcome provided to the alien and stranger;
- a life of service in the manner of our Savior;
- justice for the poor and powerless;
- our perception of security in the midst of danger.

Such issues are shaped by our worship and where we find and place our trust.

Sometimes I forget how powerful, how radical, how life altering the act of worship can be. Perhaps I forget its power because worship seems so easy. How long does

it take for us to get to church? It doesn't take long, and there are half a dozen choices one could make on the way here. And instead of going to worship, people can always choose to golf or ride out to the lake or read the *New York Times* from cover to cover.

Perhaps I forget the power and danger of worship because we don't expect much. Who is preaching this week...? Maybe they'll sing some hymns I know....

Mark Labberton, a Presbyterian pastor, claims in his book *The Dangerous Act of Worship* that everything is at stake in our worship. He writes, "The crisis the church currently faces is that our individual and corporate worship do not produce the fruit of justice and righteousness that God seeks. This creates a crisis of faithfulness before God and a crisis of purpose before the world. Scripture indicates that our personal and communal worship are meant to shape our vision and fire our engines to be daring disciples, imitating and sharing the love of Jesus Christ in acts of righteousness and justice." (pp. 22-23).

Who or what is shaping our vision and firing our engines?

Psalm 121 articulates the challenges and rewards of the worship of Almighty God. Distractions and temptations abound. To worship with integrity is difficult. It encompasses both the destination and the journey.

It has everything to do with our hearts and minds, with our need for grace and a wide inclusion of others, with justice and its pursuit for those who cannot get it.

Worship is personal and consoling. Worship enlarges the folks gathered at the table and pushes us forward beyond merely the personal. Worship is powerful and dangerous because our worship embraces the One who cares most deeply for us and for our world.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where does my help come? It comes from the Lord who created the heavens and earth."

Resources:

The Bible (The New Revised Standard Version)

The Message (Eugene Peterson)

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