

Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
"Shade-Keeping"

Based on Psalm 121. Where Is My Help?

At some point for all of us on the journey of faith, the moment arrives when the God we thought we knew seems utterly absent, beyond all help, beyond all hope, perhaps even beyond all existence.

There is a time of innocent, point A in our lives, when we may feel fairly secure in our understanding of who God is and who God will continue to be, but then point B happens and *boom!* All of a sudden, the God we thought we knew just doesn't do what we think God should do, and the crisis occurs.

For example, what do we do when trans youth and poor pregnant people are relegated to political footballs and God does nothing to stop it? What do we do when the very hills to which the psalmist tells us to lift our eyes have been stripped by the fossil fuel industry and sold to the highest bidder and God does not stop it? What do we do when the violence *out there* hits home in our own families and God does not stop it? What do we do when things just plain go wrong and nothing seems to right it?

Rest assured the upbeat optimistic seemingly-secure-in-his faith psalmist of our Lesson today has wrestled with such anguish, even as the lyrics to his song sound so definitive, so self-assured. The psalmist here is not simply regurgitating a lesson learned in Sunday School in order to win brownie points from the pastor. The psalmist is speaking from the other side of tragic, heartbreaking experience - from exile and occupation and just plain *life* - singing in a sort of alchemy that transforms evil and destruction and despair into the gold of spiritual growth. Moving from point A through point B and into a point C, where the psalmist can rest in the presence of a God who is at the end of the beyond any conception any of could ever actually hold about God.

Think Leonard Cohen putting the words of Julian of Norwich into song, with his deep wise gravely voice assuring us: *all shall be well, and all shall be well and ever manner of thing shall be well.*

By the time this psalm becomes codified in our Scriptures, including in the time of Jesus, it has turned into a pilgrimage chant, the second song in a set of fifteen songs sung by caravans making their way to Jerusalem for the various festivals of the Jewish liturgical year. Imagine Jesus and his disciples three years into their ministry, chanting this psalm as they make their way to the Passover festival that will ultimately take his life. Imagine Jesus, knowing full well the danger into which he leads his friends, using this psalm to prepare them spiritually for what will happen.

From where does our help come? Jesus calls out to the crowd, as they set out on their journey. *From the God who made heaven and earth!* they shout back with the fervor of those first few steps.

Is God your shade at your right hand? Jesus demands, as the days get longer and the way gets harder. *The sun shall not strike us by day or the moon by night.*

Will God keep you from all evil? Jesus asks, knowing full well the evil that awaits them. *God will protect us, always,* they respond.

This is the song on the lips of John Lewis, for example, as we mark the anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama. *I was prepared to die*, John Lewis has said of that moment. Knowing God really was protecting him, even in the midst of the violence that rained down upon him.

Because God really does protect us. Just not always the way we think God will ... or should. As the disciples learn all too well - and even Jesus, himself, when he cries out from the cross that God has abandoned him - God's help, God's protection, even God's presence is not always to be found always in the immediacy of our situation. It is instead a trust, a promise to which we cling, when even hope seems hopelessness. That is what the resurrection is all about.

Lift up your eyes, the psalmist instructs, and look *beyond* your present moment. Shift your focus, adjust your perception. Find a way to find your help. And don't give up until it comes. Because the journey itself is as important as the destination. And the payoff is truly worth the work.

What we find on the journey is that we need as much protection from the evil within us as we do from the evil that rages without. And, in a paradoxical twist, that spiritual protection does finally come when we have learned how to dwell so deeply in our birthright of the steadfast, never-quitting, never failing love, always with us, eternal love of God that absolutely nothing can hurt us, even if it kills us.

As it turns out, this psalm is as much a petition as it is a proclamation, almost a gut-level cry for help, with an entire community responding with assurance that we are not alone, even if we think we are, that *there really is* a steady foot that will not give way; a constant divine watchfulness; a guardian providing shade or protection from the hot sun; a guardian from evil of the very essence of one's life in every movement and in every time, and that until we can believe it on our own, the community will believe it for us.

It turns out, this psalm is the ancient Jewish version of the Acclamation you and I recite every Sunday. Insisting, *with believers in every time and place*, even when we struggle with doubt and despair, [that we can boldly] *rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.*