

Psalm 121

John 14:23-29

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by the Rev. Dr. David McCreath

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## The Gospel and the News

### Introduction

Karl Barth was a well-known German-Swiss theologian in the middle of the twentieth century. One of his famous comments to preachers is that one should enter the pulpit with a newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. When I was in Seminary, our theology professor did just that for morning chapel one day. He brought a Bible and a newspaper to the pulpit, and as he read a news headline, he followed it with a biblical verse. It is not always easy to do, but Dr. Haroutunian did it for at least fifteen minutes. His headline and scripture couplet were occasionally augmented with some commentary. I sometimes recall that chapel service, especially when I see headlines such as we have in our newspapers these days. Economic distress, unabated pandemic, public safety, border and immigration problems. How can we see children separated from their parents and not cry out for biblical justice?

Well, I have been tempted at times to follow Dr. Barth's advice, though I usually am quickly refreshed with a cold dash of reality, for it is not an easy task. So today I have instead clumped together our many distresses ... the virus, the immigration, the failure of foreign policy, the inaction of Congress ... and you can complete the list. Against all that summary, I have selected two passages ... one from the Old Testament, and one from the New Testament. They do not pair up with issues in quite the same way as Dr. Barth suggested; however, it is my hope that we can find resources that will help us to respond to the surrounding issues in ways that not only relieve anxieties, but offer us opportunities to move forward as individuals and a congregation.

Quite likely you may come to some disagreement with me, or discover additional insights that fit your situation. Fine. I would enjoy discussing your insights, or wrestle with your disagreements. In doing so, we shall both strengthen our faith.

### I.

Let's first turn to Psalm 121. This psalm is probably one of the best known after Psalm 23. At least portions, especially the first two verses, are often quoted. In some Lutheran churches, they are particularly used in the baptism service, and in some funeral services.

The Psalm is one of a cluster of Psalms known as Psalms of Ascent. That is, these are psalms thought often to be used by pilgrims on the way to a temple festival in Jerusalem. Psalm 121 is thought to have been sung antiphonally. A leader, perhaps a priest, would ask a question, and the pilgrims would answer.

I think one of the reasons the Psalm is popular is that it declares that God will protect the pilgrims on their journey. While we are very unlikely to trudge a dusty road toward Jerusalem, we can understand that a journey can be full of difficulties and uncertainties. One of the curiosities about the Psalm is the confidence that God will protect the travelers from the sun and moon. Of course, in the Middle East the sun can be hot and dry, making the trip difficult,

uncomfortable, and even dangerous. The protection from the moon is curious ... there is at least one reference in the Bible of the moon causing a condition we might today consider epilepsy. No wonder the psalmist sought God's protection!

This scripture has been called a "Psalm for Sojourners," for not only does it report on travelers of ancient times. It also reminds us of God's continuing care for us during our earthly sojourn. God, the maker of heaven and earth, has provided us with a home we inhabit only temporarily. It is an invitation to live fully in the present, travelers on the way to God. With good reason the early church was known as "the Way," and we still carry that sense of being sojourners and travelers. I am not referring to some "other worldly" destination...that we can leave for a different discussion. Our situation, though, is that of a people on the move...always searching out appropriate understandings of what it means to live together as humans and being ready to make changes in our ordered lives so we may live more faithfully. We do so, always assured of God's protective care.

Imagine a pilgrim trudging along, likely in a group of fellow pilgrims. We don't know if he or she was troubled, or if they were just impressed with the hills surrounding them. Perhaps you noted that the version I read refers to mountains. The Hebrew text is not completely clear, just as we often slide between the two terms, depending upon our perspective. What we do know is that mountains were important to the Hebrew people. Mountains played important roles in the Exodus journey. And, of course, it was on a mountain that Moses met God, who then outlined the ten commandments. The Hebrews considered some mountains as sacred sites ... they represented the threshold where the Holy One could step down to earth ... mountains were the places to meet God. Lest we think that is a charming anachronism, recall what happened just a few days ago, when President Trump went to Mount Rushmore to celebrate the Fourth of July, and there met Native Americans who consider the Black Hills to be a sacred site. Similar dedications to mountains can be found among the Native Americans in the southwest. I enjoy being in the mountains, and I know several members of Stone Church also find a peace and satisfaction while traveling and resting among mountains. There is a permanence there that speaks of the divine, so it is little wonder that the Hebrew pilgrim sought God in the hills around him.

We ask ourselves, then, when confronted with stresses and strains of the present day, can we join the Hebrew pilgrim in affirming the permanence of God, that above and underneath all our contentious moving about, we can be confident that we are protected, that God will keep our life "from this time forever more?" Yes, the virus is a demon of a disease, and not to be taken lightly. We have responsibilities to each other to join in slowing its advance. We can do so because we have the promises of Psalm 121. Praise be to God.

## II.

Now we turn to the New Testament lesson. These are selected verses from the Gospel of John, Chapter 14. This chapter is one of three known as the Final Discourses. In these three chapters, Jesus is giving his final instructions to his disciples, knowing that his time on earth is drawing to a close. He has, of course, earlier let the disciples know that trouble is coming. In fact, when he announced he was going to Jerusalem, some of the disciples counseled him not to go, knowing that feelings were running high, and trouble was brewing. He led them to the city anyway. Now he must prepare them, for he is aware they will no longer have him around to lead them.

In one of the earlier verses of this chapter, Jesus, in John's words, introduces us to the Holy Spirit. It is not said in just those words; instead, depending upon your translation, Jesus says refers to Counselor, Advocate, and Companion. He also refers to "Spirit of Truth." This is the first time we learn the word of "Paraclete," a Greek word that catches up all those other meanings. The Spirit is to accompany the disciples, helping them to remember and understand the teachings of Jesus: "The Companion, the Holy Spirit...will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you."

It is interesting that this promise of a Companion parallels the assurance of God's protection and care we found when we read Psalm 121. God's presence is with us, teaching, guiding, and caring for us, even if the rest of the world does not recognize the Companion.

Before we synthesize the two passages, though, there is one other thing we need to consider. It is Jesus' final gift. Look again at verse 27. Jesus says "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you...Don't be troubled or afraid." Given our present confusion and uncertainties, those are certainly comforting words! Perhaps you are like me, occasionally coming to the end of the day, wondering where the peace has gone, and how can we establish it. We hope life doesn't have to be lived this way, right? So, at every worship service we pass the peace to one another, hoping that comfort will come. Certainly, that seems appropriate with this promise from Jesus. This promise, spoken just before Jesus was tried and crucified, this gift of peace, is the first time "peace" is mentioned in the fourth Gospel. Some folks use the word "peace" as a farewell, or a leaving, such as "be well...peace be with you." But here it is something different...it is a gift that comes from deep within Jesus, as he encourages the disciples not to be troubled, or afraid. It is not, however, a false promise of security, nor the end of conflict. As one commentator phrased it, "Jesus' peace is an all-embracing sphere of his life, his joy, his love." It is a peace that rests in Christ's center. It is not complacency, or lethargy. It was at the core of his life, and he offers that to us. It was not an offer of sentiment, or an affirmation not to worry. Instead, it was a challenge to the disciples to find strength to face the new issues that would arise with Jesus' departure.

Then, again, he promised that the Spirit would be sent to be their companion and advocate. This is peace not easy to attain, except as we find the ways to remain in contact with God and Christ, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit. And that is what we must consider next.

### III.

We have learned that God promises to care for us, to protect us. We have learned that God has sent an Advocate to be with us, reminding use of Jesus' teachings. We are left with a question ... how does the Spirit come to us? I suggest we look to a concept that took root in the Reformation of the sixteenth Century. Used primarily by the Reformed tradition churches, it has also been used by Lutheran and other churches as well. I refer to the concept of the Means of Grace. These are the ways in which God gives grace. They are the avenues through which God's grace flows to us. By no means are they the only way God's grace enters our lives. God has myriad ways of coming to us. But the means of grace are actions and disciplines we can use to enhance being receptive when God approaches.

Traditionally there are at least seven of these means. Some scholars may include a few more on the list, but these are recognized as the core. They are Sacraments, Prayer, Scripture, Worship,

Preaching, Bearing Burdens, and Stewardship. As I quickly review these, I want you to think how they can function as avenues of God's grace in your lives.

Some of the means of grace are corporate. Sacraments. There are two, baptism and communion. We believe that Christ is present at each time the sacraments are presented. They are one of the primary ways in which the presence of Christ can be known, which is one of the reasons we practice them regularly. Worship. Through our regular worship, we are reminded of Christ's ministry and teachings, and we respond with prayer and song. Preaching is, or should be, a recalling of Christ's ministry as it applies to our daily living.

There are a few means of grace which are more individual. For instance, Prayer is often a personal discipline, and we are encouraged to pray daily, by ourselves or in families. Prayer is a part of our response to God and is the way we can lift to God the concerns, the issues, and the gratitude we feel in our lives. Along with prayer, it is helpful if we also discipline ourselves in reading the Scriptures. The Bible, of course, is one of our principle ways of understanding our faith, and of learning the stories of faithful people who have gone before us. I think one of the most interesting Means of Grace is this: the Bearing of Burdens, which means caring for those who are burdened with grief or anxiety, or who may lack the means to sustain life. We see this often these days, with food banks giving out three and four times the amount of food they usually distribute in a week, or we hear of relatives who are unable to be in touch with loved ones confined to restricted hospital settings. Bearing Burdens may also mean lifting prayers of intercession, asking for God's healing and hope for those who are distressed. The final means I will mention is Stewardship, another very broad concern. It encompasses care for the environment, it is sharing our wealth, it is all that goes into care for creation and human life. One measure of stewardship I have seen discussed by commentators is that it becomes a Means of Grace when our giving forces us to rethink or consider our priorities.

Most of us, of course, would find it difficult to maintain all seven of the Means of Grace as central to our daily lives. They will appear as opportunities at various times in our lives. I suspect also that some persons will discover that God's grace enters their life in ways not included among the ones I described. That is fine. God is able to share grace with us in a multitude of ways, appropriate to our lives. The point I want to emphasize is that God is always at work through the Spirit, seeking to strengthen us, to offer us hope, and to give meaning to our lives.

The Bible is replete with stories of people who have lived in God's grace. Reading those stories we learn how lives were changed, how folks gained courage in the face of difficulties, and how human life became so much fuller as they aligned themselves with God and opened to the Spirit the opportunity to come alongside them as a Companion. It may be that we could explore the idea and the specific Means of Grace, perhaps as an Adult Church School Class. Imagine what it would be like to share among ourselves the stories of how God's grace enhances our lives, even when we consider ourselves to be so ordinary.

I believe there is at least one more advantage to using these spiritual disciplines ... They integrate the lessons we learned from the Psalm with the writings of the Apostle John. The Psalmist declared that God is our protector...God will protect us on our journey, and from the sun and the moon. Our protector, says the Psalmist, never sleeps or rests. Then in the Gospel, John writes that Jesus gifted us with peace, peace that could only come as we are secure in God's care.

## Conclusion

Well ... we started out this morning with the admonition of Karl Barth, a theologian who had thought long and hard about our faith and our world. One story about him is that he told a student once that he would write a sentence and then think about it for half an hour, and his books should be read the same way. I never attained that level of commitment, and neither did any of my classmates. Yet, Dr. Barth was deeply committed to understanding how the God who created us continues to relate to the divinely created world. He gave us an image of how we could proceed to understand the world, and the church in it. We could, I suppose, spend time looking at headlines and searching for a relevant scriptural passage. I believe he was pointing us to something different. I believe he wanted us to read the newspaper or watch the news on TV from a stance of faith ... a strong commitment to a God who has for generations promised to protect us, to support us, and to care for us. It is a faith that is supported by an Advocate, a Counselor, sent to remind us of the love, care, and promises of the Son of God, our Christ, Jesus. Our response is to keep ourselves open to the possibilities that God wants to come to us, if we will but be receptive.

The Psalms are such a rich source for our understanding. I want to end with the first verses of Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart..."

That for me is the relationship of the Gospel and the News.

Let us Pray: Good and Gracious God, we give you thanks for the witness of persons who long ago learned of your care, your protection, and your grace. We pray for similar insight during these days of disease and difficulty. May we learn to recognize your presence in our lives, that we, too, may bring peace and grace to a hurting world. Amen