

Psalm 121

Confidence is Key

March 1, 2026

I lift up my eyes to the hills—

from where will my help come?

²My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

³He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

⁶The sun shall not strike you by day
nor the moon by night.

⁷The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

On Epiphany Sunday in January, I received my star word – humility. A month ago, when we studied the Beatitudes, I mentioned that my children keep me humble. If you remember how, you get bonus points. On Ash Wednesday, I preached on practicing Lent humbly, and last Sunday I humbled myself in the reverse confession booth.

But I am living proof that unhealthy, extreme humility can become self-depreciation, poor self-esteem, negative self-talk, and shame. While humility is a lovely quality, I don't want anyone to think that humility is the goal to be pursued at all costs. Like most things in life, if you practice moderation, you will find the healthy balance.

So today, I want to talk about the importance of confidence and one way to find true confidence.

Now, on Wednesday, I was supposed to have had a Bible study on our scripture text, and I did some good study preparation which I don't want to waste, so what we'll do is break down the psalm, bit by bit and as we learn it, I hope you find a depth of joyful confidence that will carry you for days to come.

So, it wouldn't hurt if you were to pull the pew Bible out and open it about halfway, which may very well get you to the Psalms. Then find chapter 121.

First things first, the psalm is grouped together with other psalms in the category called Psalms of Ascent. What that means is that this psalm is a song that would be sung or chanted while you're physically on your way to Jerusalem to visit the temple. Ok? It's traveling music.

Jerusalem is built in a hilly area, so the travelers are ascending - going uphill. I lift my eyes to the hills means I'm looking up at the city and at the temple which sits on the top of Mount Moriah – which is about half the elevation of the city of Denver. It's not a great mountain but it's much bigger than a hill. So, I lift my eyes means I'm looking up my destination - to the place where I worship God, the thin place where hearing God's voice and feeling close to God seems so much easier. The place where we practice rituals that our ancestors practiced. In modern terms, you're on your way to church and you see the front of the building, behind me, as you're pulling into the church parking lot.

That's part A of verse one.

Now, part B. What does it say in your Bible? “- from where will my help come?”

There is a lot to talk about in this half of a verse. First, let's spend some time with the word “help.” What help does the psalmist need? A lot of scholars have described the roads to Jerusalem as dangerous roads, full of bandits and wild animals. And so, there are some who think that the help needed is just safety on the journey, but I think there's more to it than that.

You know that hymn, Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing? It has a line that is mysterious to many of us. It says, “Here I raise my Ebenezer.” Anyone know what that means? “I raise my Ebenezer?” And Ebenezer is capitalized. Like Ebenezer Scrooge, but the hymn writer isn't referring to a person. We're not raising up someone called Ebenezer.

Ebenezer is a thing. A large stone, like a piece of Westerly granite, that is set up or raised to remember a moment in time when God intervened in a big way. It is a combination of two Hebrew words – eben (eh-ben) which means stone and ezer (AY-zer) which means help. But not just help. Dr. Wil Gafney of Brite Divinity School writes, “What is clear is that

the help the psalmist seeks is that which is the particular specialty of God. The word *ezer*, . . . is rarely used of humans [in scripture], with very few exceptions.”

In fact, in Hebrew there are a couple of different ways to say help, and one does describes the help that people give to other people. But the word *ezer* is the word that is used when you’re receiving divine help. And it’s the word the psalmist uses when they say, the next line of our psalm “from where my help comes.”

And that brings me to another point. You might already know this, but in Hebrew there is no punctuation. None. So modern translators have had to make some assumptions, and there are different ways to read the text now. Most all of them mean the same thing in the end, thankfully.

But listen to the difference. Our NRSV, the pew Bible, divides verse one into two phrases, with a dash between them, and uses a question mark to make the second phrase say, “from where will my help come?”

Other translations use a period and no dash to make verse one a complete sentence which says “I lift up my eyes to the hills from where my help comes.” The hills are where my help comes from.

My point is to say that between the lack of punctuation, and the inability for us as English readers to know that there is a difference between help among humans and help that we know comes from God, we could easily miss the depth of confidence this psalmist has in the first verse.

“I will lift up my eyes to the hills” (I will keep my eyes fixed on God) “from where my help comes.” (My divine intercession comes from my God.)

But, as I mentioned before, either way – statement or question - gets us to verse two, where the psalmist answers themselves, “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

So, if it’s a statement, it’s a confident one. If it’s a question, it’s a rhetorical one that has a confident answer following right behind it.

And then, the psalmist begins to name the ways in which they are confident that God is their divine helper. And they use one key word over and over - “keep.”

The Hebrew word is “shamar” (shah-MAHR). It occurs 6 times in 8 verses. It implies that God is actively close at hand, awake, on guard duty, protective over you.

Here are the first two instances of “shamar”

“he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.”

Now, this idea that God does not need to sleep is a cornerstone of our confidence in God, is it not? That God can watch over our loved ones while we must rest. That God’s watchful eye is on us when our eyelids droop. That’s confidence. I know of many new parents and people who sit beside those in hospitals and hospice beds who will themselves to be watchful through the longest hours of the night, but none of us can go without sleep. Only God can.

And here are the rest of the “shamars” -

⁵The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

⁶The sun shall not strike you by day
nor the moon by night.

⁷The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

Dr. Bill Bellinger, who I mentioned last week, reminds us that this language, which is being used at the beginning of the worshipful experience of a pilgrimage, is parallel to the language used by the priests at the benediction of pilgrimage worship from Numbers 6 which says, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

If God’s very self is keeping you, helping you with divine help, from the beginning of your journey to the end, is always awake and watchful, then I hope you feel confident. I hope you’re just so comfortably at peace and breathing easier. I hope you’re feeling like you know who you are and whose you are, and that with God, you can do anything.

Confidence is just as important as humility. An article in Psychology Today says confidence supports these five things: it reduces your general anxiety, and it gives you greater motivation to try new things. When you try new things and you stumble or fail, confidence helps you be more resilient. It also improves your relationships because confidence increases active listening and empathy, and it gives you a stronger sense of your own identity. Yeah, it’s that important. We all need confidence.

So, my Lenten opportunity for you is this. Claim this Psalm and let it give you confidence. Fix your eyes on God when you feel nervous or anxious. Try something new. Don't wonder where the help is coming from. Declare that God is the source of your help, the one who will be your keeper. When you rest, rest knowing that God doesn't have to. And then, with that confidence, when you rise, be bold in the name of the God who loves you and the whole world enough to send Jesus to us – not to judge the world, but to save it, that we might have everlasting life. That's confidence in a nutshell. Amen.