

19 Pentecost, Proper 24, 2019
October 20, 2019
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC

Genesis 32:22-31 Psalm 121 2 Tim 3:14-4:5 Luke 18:1-8

Psalm 121 is one of the “psalms of ascent,” probably used for those on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, “the city on the hill.” This psalm can be used as a blessing for those about to leave on a journey.

I assure you – we are all on a journey.

Some journeys require packing our clothes, making flight arrangements, maybe finding our passport, coordinating details with friends and family; this is a journey of geography. We are going from here to somewhere else. We fret: when will we get there, what if we crash, I don’t know the city, the language, the weather ... where will I get help?

Some journeys are spiritual; we are (re)committing ourselves to a relationship with God. We might be fighting doubt, sin, evil, and false teachings. Opening the bible at random will not give us every answer; in addition, we struggle with understanding these ancient words. Who will help me?

Each of our journeys is lifelong; we experience joy and sorrow, growth and regress, failure and success. No life path is straight! The ongoing question is the same:

Where will I get help?

The second verse is our answer, and it is a confession of faith: my help comes from the Lord, creator of (who made) heaven and earth. Ultimate help comes from the Lord, the creator.

Think for a minute: what is your journey, what are your worries, right now? Bring them to mind.

Now, with me, say this passage: “my help comes from the Lord, creator of heaven and earth.” Fight your worries with these words: MY help comes from the Lord!

Perfect help does not come from a travel agency, airline personnel, road signs, your GPS, or random attempts at happening upon the right bible passage. Our help – throughout our lifetime comes from our relationship with God.

The rest of the psalm is a blessing and an assurance that God is with us on every journey, from a short trip to our entire life's journey ... from this life to "forever more." What a beautiful psalm to carry in our hearts: a prayer and a blessing.

What a far cry Jacob's blessing is from this comforting psalm! We remember that Jacob stole his brother's birthright AND his father's end of life blessing. It is hardly a wonder, then, that Jacob might find himself alone, and wrestling with God. We notice that the bible says that Jacob wrestled with a man; it is Jacob himself who says that he wrestled with God. Answering to God must be a difficult thing, requiring courage and perseverance. Courage because who takes on God? Perseverance, because Jacob would not let go of God.

Imagine having Jacob's tenacity! Have we ever wrestled with God until we felt hurt? Who won? We "win" when we hold onto God, even when we are wrestling with big issues – even wrestling with God about what we think that God is or is not doing for us. Wrestling with God is a form of prayer, and prayer changes us; over time, we are changed in a way that the world can see, perhaps not in Jacob's lifetime limp, but in other, positive ways. There is a deep joy that settles our spirit, calms our fears, and strengthens our resolve. We belong to God. We belong to God through everything, no matter what. Jacob remarks that he came face to face with God and lived (it was thought in ancient times that people would die if they saw God). We come face to face in the person of Jesus – and we are called by our baptismal covenant to seek Christ – the risen Jesus – in everyone we meet. That quest might feel like a night-long or life-long struggle.

The widow fights with an unjust, apathetic judge. She teaches us about speaking up, speaking out, demanding that just be done. She shows us how to practice not losing hope. Keep going! Keep speaking! Keep praying! Luke's message is that God is nothing like this unjust judge, that God hears us and will bring justice – that God, in fact, is already active in the world.

It can be hard to remember that God is already active in the world, and that our prayers join the prayers of all who suffer and of the heavenly throng that is rejoicing. Our prayer life is not about giving God a grocery list or "to do" list and waiting for things to happen. Our prayer life is about seeking God and joining God in ongoing creation – ongoing because the ancient psalms live in our hearts, ongoing because even an apathetic world sometimes gets things right, ongoing because Jacob held onto God until he received God's blessing. Praying sometimes means wrestling with God, crying out to God and then do what we can to partner with God. Such prayer demands that we trust that God is already doing what God needs to do, that God already active in us and in the world.

It is difficult to remember that God is already active when the homeless seek shelter next to our building, when sex and labor trafficking are rampant in this neighborhood, when Samaritan house continues breaking records in the number of families it serves. Who is the judge from whom we must demand help, change, justice?

Being active with God in the world means that we feed the hungry, as in fact we are doing. We offer compassion to the grieving. We speak, teach and act against hatred and prejudice; we respect the dignity of every human being. We make our case not just before God but with God.

With the psalmist, we proclaim:

I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence is my help to come?

My help comes from the Lord!

Our Lord, who always hears us, replies:

“my precious child, go.”

Go on your journey.

I will keep your life.

I will be with “your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.”

Amen!