

Slide 1– The Lord is your keeper

Today we have the beautiful word of Psalm 121 as a companion text for today's readings. The words have been used at times for baptisms and funerals. The psalm has generated songs. Psalm 121 is also a word many people of faith have use in their personal prayers.

Going back to ancient times it was known as a song of assent for God's people for the times when they would "go up" to Jerusalem for an annual feast day. Since people had to travel by foot and perhaps for days, it was natural that they would pray to the LORD for protection. It was natural that they would pray that the LORD would "keep" the people Israel and neither slumber nor sleep. (The activity of God as keeper is of one who watches over another. The LORD is a Good Keeper that is steadfast and sure with help and protection.)

Slide 2 – person walking on a road

We all know that fleeting moment of anxiety which comes just at the beginning of a long journey. You can have your bags packed and ready, the family buckled into their seats, the videos ready to run, the music queued. But just before you take off a question might be there in the back of your mind: Will we arrive safe and sound? Will we avoid the hazards of heavy traffic?

We all have times when we look out and wonder, where can we turn to for help? We see all kinds of suggestions of things that claim to provide just what we need. We are bombarded with thousands of brand names and ads each day. The author of the psalm answers the anxious query with confidence. The psalmist confesses in faith, "I know where to look, I look to God, the maker of heaven and earth." This psalmist knows who to trust.

Those who journeyed to Jerusalem in ancient days likely saw places of worship that were dedicated to lesser gods. They weren't bombarded like we are today, but suggestions were present. People knew the stories of the lesser gods, such as a god that would go dormant and sleep during the winter months and become revived for the spring. It was quite striking that the psalmist would confess, "My help comes from God, the maker of heaven and earth." "My God is available 24/7. My God never sleeps!" The strong and confident confession is a good word.

The rest of the psalm is a blessing for those who embark on a journey. And more than for a single trip by on the road or in the air, it is a word for everyday and everyone. Life really is a journey from birth to death to life eternal. To be able to have God's word ready on the lips can be a check against the anxieties and evils of the day.

It is not enough to have head knowledge of the goodness of God. It matters that God's words become part of the words we say every day. I was reminded of this truth years ago when I became part of a parish and a different word was part of the normal discourse of some folks. You have heard it before, I'm sure.

Slide 3 – "It is what it is."

"It is what it is." At that time I had not used this phrase much so I wondered what people meant by it. According to the Urban Dictionary it is a rather negative quip that became popular first in business. But it is also part of mainstream conversations. The phrase in its most polite form means "It ain't going to change, so deal with it or don't." I am sure some people have used it as a way of expressing frustration. In its least desirable use it is full of contempt and disrespect.

It is the kind of saying that ends any further conversation. It is a word that cuts off discourse. It is a word that can leave people divided. It is not a worthy word like the one God gives for the journey of life.

Slide 4 - Sojourn

Life is a journey, a sojourn. We might prefer another image. How often have we longed for a moment in time to last and last? A parent eagerly greets her adult children who have recently left home to study or work or begin their own family. They have come home for the day. For a time they laugh and walk and enjoy the outdoors like they used to when they were kids. For a moment the parent watches and reflects, but then realizes there is no way that this moment will last. The adult children will leave in an hour or so and resume their lives. Life is a journey, it is fluid, it moves on, one is never in the same place for long.

Jesus called his followers to this sort of sojourning life. Although people were drawn to him, he did not want them to stay in one moment for long. Instead Jesus was on the move and he encouraged those who were drawn to him to follow him.

Slide 5 – Jesus and Nicodemus

In our gospel story today Nicodemus was one who was drawn to Jesus. He came to Jesus at night to keep the exchange hidden. He confesses the truth, that Jesus is from God, yet he is not able to fully see what Jesus offers and who Jesus is. I think he came wanting to have what he already knew confirmed. But Jesus will not allow him to stay at that level. Jesus attempts to move him to a deeper understanding of God.

Jesus himself is God incarnate. Jesus is the Son of God and the promised saving power for any and all who receive him and actively follow him. We are hopeful that because Nicodemus was open to pursue Jesus, that he will move him forward in faith. We want him to be as full of trust in Jesus as the psalmist in God. Sadly we do not find evidence that Nicodemus makes that leap of faith in the story. That doesn't mean it didn't happen, just that we cannot say for sure.

Slide – Keep: you, Israel, from all evil, your life

So what do we do as we wait for the promise to be fulfilled? That is where having a very good word of God on our lips and in our hearts can be helpful. Any journey through mountains anticipates descending into depths as well as traveling along the heights. Psalm 121 knows of depths and heights. That is the journey of everyday life. God promises to be in the midst of that life, keeping watch over us. As much as God promises to keep the individual, God also has an eye for the people. God's work is to protect from evil and guard life. This is a word for all who are troubled and anxious, who need a word as they wait for the new day.

Slide – International Day of Women

Today is the International Women's Day. The year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment to the US Constitution which granted women the right to vote. But it excluded women of color. Some who favored the right of women to vote but only white women wished to suppress the rights of all people of color. The journey for rights, safety, equality, and equity for women has its ups and downs. It took another 45 years until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to officially include women of color.

It mattered that people fought for these fundamental rights because such fights bring to light the many ways other segments of the population are still waiting for equitable access to resources and opportunity. It was a catalyst for our Lutheran Church to remove the barriers of ordination for women. This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in our Lutheran Church. And yet,

there is so much change that still needs to happen. Too many people suffer from oppression and the absence of fundamental human rights.

Slide – Blessing for the Journey

Many stand in need of God's protection. Many stand in need of God's blessing. Many stand in need of God's promises that a new day is on the way. In Jesus God broke down all barriers. In Christ the purpose of old has become new, we are God's people blessed to be a blessing so that all may have life.

Let us practice being advocates for God's protection, God's blessing, and God's new day in one small way today. Turn to your neighbor and say the word of blessing.

(Wait for the people to bless each other.)

We are on this life's journey together, with an eye for all to know God's saving grace. With this word we combine God's purpose and promise, we promote confidence and hope, that God cares for and watches over all. Now that you have blessed your neighbor, keep this word close to mind, and as you go out into the world, say a prayer of blessing for a woman or girl that you see who does not have equality or equity, say a prayer of blessing for any and all whose fundamental human rights are in danger. We are blessed to be a blessing.

Turning our hearts to God who is gracious and merciful, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

God of blessing, assure your church of your gracious presence and your steadfast love. Give us confidence to tell others how your salvation frees us and is for all. Help us to give voice to your good words that they might provide hope for the oppressed and the fearful. On this International Women's Day, we pray especially that women will break barriers, be lifted up to be leaders in society and church, and fight for the rights of all. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God who gives life anew, your Spirit hovered over the waters and you called creation into being. Nurture and bless all signs of rebirth around us; diminishing snowbanks, the songs of returning birds, thawing lakes and warm breezes, running sap and new shoots. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God of the nations, lead countries in your ways so that righteousness rules. Protect those who advocate for the needs of children, migrants and victims of violence. Watch over women and girls who struggle for life without equal rights. Give courage to lawmakers, lawyers, judges, and law enforcement, guiding them to do justice and to love mercy. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God who gives life anew, give us a fresh vision of your healing power among us. Restore hope to those who remain in the depths of depression, anxiety or despair. Bring mercy and relief to those who are sick, injured, or suffering, especially Joe Mattice and Kathy Kurshinsky. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God of blessing, guard and keep the coming in and going out of your people at St. John's, especially

Michael & Alice Wall

Tom, Karlee, Elise and Gwyneth Wallin

Clayona Walter

Harold & Judy Walters

Tom Walther

Joseph & Joy Washburn, Taylor Wenaas, Collin Washburn

Cheryl Watson

Dolores Weinke

Becky Welke

Craig & Diane Wenaas

Gerald Wendt

Verena Westberg

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

According to your steadfast love, O God, hear these and all our prayers as we commend them to you; through Christ our Lord. Amen.