

Our Keeper
Genesis 12:1-4a and Psalm 121
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Preached March 20, 2011 at San José, Costa Rica

Every so often, you have to make the case for God. Every so often, you have to proclaim that God is not dead, despite evidence to the contrary. Every so often you have to bring back into the consciousness of a world-weary people, the ancient truth that God is real, that God does love us, and that God has a better future in mind for us than we could ever envision for ourselves.

It's not that God can't make God's own case – far from it. God announces all of that good news in countless beautiful and glorious and musical ways. It is just that often we do not have eyes to see it, nor ears to hear it, when we are inundated with the cares and burdens of the day. It is as if the word of life is buried so deeply under images of pain and suffering and death, at least in our own hearts and minds, that not a sound, not a glimpse of goodness can escape the rubble. And that is when those of us who still can must climb to the top of the rubble and get out our megaphones and tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

Making God's case is sometimes known as the art of apologetics, or presenting a “defense of the faith” using a rational argument, while fending off all objections. Ironically, apologetics is often undertaken as an evangelical promotion of the faith, even though the word *apologia* in the Greek literally means defense. But in any case, making God's case apologetically involves laying out a

reasonable, systematic presentation arguing for the existence of God and the claims of the Christian faith. It is used to rebut the claims of other religions and worldviews, and to counter beliefs within Christianity that are considered suspicious. The ranks of Christian apologists include names with which you may be familiar: C.S. Lewis, Josh McDowell, Benjamin Warfield, Jonathan Edwards, and even the Apostle Paul. Each of these has offered convincing proofs of the existence of God and the witness of the Gospel.

It is not to sell any of these faithful servants short, however, to note that when you are suffering a crisis of faith, that when from the sheer weight of tragedy and suffering in your own life, or in the lives of those you care about, you begin to question how a God we call compassionate can tolerate such suffering in the world, that when the sum total of abuse and violence and trauma adds up to a compelling case against God, when faced with those types of situations, a reasonable and systematic defense of the existence and goodness of God is not only the very last thing you need, but quite possibly the least convincing way of affirming the very thing you are trying to prove. As useful as it may be, apologetics has its limits.

It is in those times when it is the heart, rather than the mind, that is questioning God and faith, that making God's case must be done with a different method and a different tone. That is when we must turn to the Psalms, and especially a psalm like 121, to find the words, the images, indeed the very heart of

a faithful worshiper of God that can begin to put back together the broken heart of someone who has seen too much, suffered too much, grieved too much. “I lift my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.” Eight short verses, so much confidence, so much comfort.

The power of these verses is not so much the literalness of what is being proclaimed. None of us really expect to never get sunburn or to never experience evil, not even the Psalmist. No, the power of the psalm comes precisely because of its quiet assurance, its complete trust, even its simple matter-of-factness. It doesn't read like the list of the platitudes we sometimes hear when we come face to face with the unexplainable: “Everything happens for a purpose.” “It's part of God's plan.” “God never gives you more than you can handle.” Those are the things we say when we don't know what else to say. The Psalmist appeals not to reassuring phrases, but to an enduring experience of providence, of protection. You hear years of faithful witness to God's companionship on the journey, to promises made and covenants kept. The Psalmist knows the story, knows about the ups and down of his people's faithfulness to God, and yet there is not for a moment a doubt that

even though they have fallen down on their end of the bargain, God ever will. “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”

Psalm 121 is very likely a psalm of pilgrimage recited or sung at the beginning of a trip to Jerusalem for the celebration of one of the three annual festivals in which the Israelites were required to participate. If you lived outside Jerusalem, it could be quite a trek to get there, you and your family, over hill and dale, through valley and over mountain. The way could be quite treacherous, with hazards such as a very severe desert sun, the threat of lunacy from traveling under intense moonlight, bandits waiting to rob you, and of course the various shrines and religious places that your apostate neighbors had set up to worship their various fertility and weather gods. I’m not making any of this up. It may seem pretty straightforward for us to get in the car and come to church for Easter, but scholars have identified these hazards as those likely to provoke the need for the blessing for the journey which the psalm provides. Verses one and two are in the voice of the pilgrim, posing and then answering that beautifully phrased question, “I lift my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Jerusalem, of course, is the high point of the surrounding landscape, and you can just imagine those words being spoken at the moment of departure as the pilgrims look toward their destination.

The pilgrim is answered in the following verses with a reminder of God’s faithfulness and a final blessing, probably by an elder of the community, with the

key word “keep” or “keeper” throughout. Six times that image of protection is invoked, each time recalling God’s journey with Israel in its past. Recall the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that led them through the desert: “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” Recall the prophecy of Isaiah to Israel for the day of salvation to come: “Indeed over all the glory, there will be a canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a shelter from the storm and rain.” “The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.” With echoes of the stories of old ringing in their ears, the pilgrims would set out on their journey with trust and confidence that God would guard their way.

We might imagine their thoughts were with Abram and his family setting out for an unknown destination, the place the Lord says that, “I *will* show you,” at some time in the future. They might have imagined the trepidation Abram felt as he left behind his homeland for an outlandish set of promises from a God who was a lot less well known than in the later days of the Psalmist. “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’ ” Leave it all behind Abram, all your security, all your family ties, all your connections for a prosperous future. Leave it to go among peoples who will resent your presence, who will try to take your wife, who will resist you at every turn. Leave it all without the assurance of a specific destination or timeframe. But leave it for the blessing I have promised you, and go with the assurance that I will guide you. And he did. And they knew the rest of the story.

All of this and more is the background to the quiet confidence of Psalm 121, a confidence that speaks to us in times when the ground of faith is shaking beneath our feet, and we feel we might be overwhelmed unexpectedly by waves of doubt that will carry us away, never to return. Earthquakes, tsunamis, nuclear crises, murderous dictators, no-fly zones and missile strikes, story after story of gang violence and drug smuggling and child abuse and corporate greed and political corruption. Where is God? Seriously? Doesn't the one who made heaven and earth care about that creation? You get a free pass this week if you had one of those fleeting thoughts that religion is indeed the opiate of the masses, that we follow a make-believe God. At the very least, this is not the way we would prefer God to operate in the world. A sign of your presence every now and then would be a very reassuring thing, O Lord. No more earthquakes, thank you very much, but maybe a heart attack for Qaddafi? Yes, every so often, you have to make the case for God.

Like the festival journey to Jerusalem, our journey must begin. It is no less hazardous than in ancient days. Some of the perils are the same, some are different, but we embark with the same sense of trepidation and hopefulness as did our ancestors in the faith. As far as it is in our control, there are no guarantees. But we are not the ones doing the keeping, thanks be to God. That is the gift of the psalmist, the reminder that no matter how steady we may be on our feet, we will stumble, that no matter how much sunscreen we may lather on we will get scorched, that no matter how fast we try to outrun evil, it will catch up with us, but

that despite all of those realities, God is still our keeper, the keeper of our lives, the one who “will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time on and forevermore.”

Last Sunday, I suggested a discipline for the season of Lent, a self-examination that begins with looking for the places in your life that smell of death or decay, and to look for the sin contributing to that death, whether your own sin, or somebody else’s sin you have endured. Lent is the season of repentance, of turning away from sin and toward life, and God gives us the strength in Jesus Christ to turn away from sin, to forgive ourselves and others, to put in its proper place the sin that makes us suffer. For some more than others, but I think for all of us at some level, that exercise can be a perilous journey, every bit as treacherous as the journey of Abram, or the psalmist, or any pilgrim who has ever trod the road to faithfulness. There may be moments on the way when you question it all, when you are ready to pack it all in and take a right turn at the next intersection. I doubt there is any case I can present to convince you that God will be with you on that journey, but I can share with the you the confidence of one who has experienced that presence: “I lift my eyes to the hills; from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Amen.