

SERMON: 22 May 2016
(Reading: Psalm 121)

It is fascinating that we often say, I feel so distressed – I want to run for the hills. For us the hills are often the place of refuge and rest, a place where we can find perspective again. To us, it is the safe place where often in the old days people would build their castles and forts.

In Biblical times, the opposite was true, as illustrated by our Psalm. The hills were the places of danger because of robbers hiding in caves and being able to see from a distance who was coming their way. They were also inhabited by wild animals who equally could damage or even kill. And then the people were also afraid to travel in the dark especially in the mountain passes.

So when the Psalmist looks at the hills surrounding Jerusalem he is only seeing danger and therefore asks the rhetorical question: where does my help come from? He knew there is only ONE who would be able to help him in his hour of need. There is only ONE who will be able to protect and guide him namely the Almighty God.

The psalmist of Psalm 121 was really a very realistic man. As his eyes look into the distant hills, he is aware of all the dangers that face him on his journey home. Jerusalem and, more specifically the temple on Mount Zion, was the place of worship for all the Israelites. It was customary for all Jews to attend at least one of the most important festivals in Jerusalem. Usually they would be blessed by the priest on the start of their journey home.

The Psalmist knew the poor dust roads could cause him to stumble and fall especially in the dark. He also knew that God does not sleep like the other gods of the other nations. He was sure that His God is the Maker of heaven and earth and is totally different from any other god. His God is his travel companion 24/7 and will protect him all the way home. Six times the verb — “*Shomer*”, to watch, guard (watches over, keep) sounds out. The perils are unknown but the security is certain.

The Lord who redeemed his son Israel according to Ex. 4:22 will not now lose him on his way home! The Lord will be his shade at his right hand. In Biblical times this meant protection and salvation and, in this case, divine protection. Why? Well in those days your right hand would hold the sword which would drive the enemy away. The right hand was the hand of strength, skill, and authority; the one of love and tenderness; the one which bestows the greatest blessings; the place of greatest favour or honour or influence. Being the more important hand or side, it is the one by which a man is led; on which a man is endangered or accused and where his protector must stand to help him. The right

hand of God is a favourite OT expression for His almighty power in creation and in war and deliverance, as well as for His sovereign mercy.

The psalmist knew what the sun could do to him whilst traveling home. A lot of people died of sunstroke.

He was also aware of what the moon could do to him and again he was also aware that some people worshipped the moon. In those days many people believed that the moon was supposed to cause lunacy (from the Latin word for moon — luna), and epilepsy, literally, — moon struck.

The Psalmist concludes his hymn of praise by saying that God will watch over him always and ever.

Later – long after the Psalm was written, people also looked up to a cross on a hill, asking themselves who is going to help them now? The Romans are still ruling; they are still paying heavy taxes to the Roman emperor. Nothing has changed and now Jesus is dead.

And again God revealed His Almighty presence through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, His ascension to heaven and the outpouring of His Holy Spirit.

God has saved you and me. He has given us the gift of His Holy Spirit. There is no journey on this earth of which we have to fear – even when the hills of challenge, danger and death are towering high above ourselves. We do not have to ever travel alone again.

Our problem today is that we tend to be “down lookers” – never really looking up and seeing and appreciating God’s Almighty presence in creation. In the June edition of the Life and Work magazine of the Church of Scotland, there is a very interesting article called “Lift up your eyes”. It is all about the dangers and challenges that new technology brings. According to this article we live now in an environment that is totally controlled by gadgets or new technological inventions. Yes we even use it to communicate without “looking someone else in the eye”. This leads to children growing up, being unable to socially interact with fellow human beings and never learning important life skills such as showing empathy, kindness and love.

I want to take this even further. Technology gives us all a false sense of meeting all our needs, which includes our spiritual needs. Yes, why should I talk to the Almighty God if I can BE the HERO/god in my own technological world.

We are mesmerised by all the new gadgets and more than often it takes over our lives. Then we become isolated... Then when the storms of life erupt we are caught up AND all we see are the mountains of challenges and problems all around us. And because we have cut ourselves off from God and other human contact, and it becomes a huge issue to call out for help.

So we need to look up again from our screens and see the Almighty God around us through his Holy Spirit. We need to have a prayerful relationship with God.

God does call us all on a journey. It is a journey into the unknown, a journey into love and laughter, a journey into pain and despair, a journey where we walk together, a journey where we walk alone.

So come, let's walk life's journey together, knowing it is God who invites us to journey and it is God who will journey with us. He will protect us through His Holy Spirit.

If you are sitting in this Church and you are finding yourself on a difficult journey like the Psalmist a long time ago, then do not be afraid. The Almighty God is your shadow on your right hand. Take His hand and walk in His ways. If you do, there will still be dangers, toils and challenges but you will not be alone. Forget a minute or so about your kindle, mobile phone, laptop or gadget and worship God.

Amen