

**Psalm 121**

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? 2 My help comes from God, who made heaven and earth. 3 God will not let your foot be moved; the one who keeps you will not slumber. 4 God who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 5 God is your keeper; the shade at your right hand. 6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. 7 God will keep you from all evil; and will keep your life. 8 God will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

**Sermon**

As I mentioned in The Chronicle, our e-newsletter this week, we are at a tender moment in our life together. Todd Smith Lippert's last Sunday as Senior Minister was just exactly a week ago. Well, we are here now. In that tender in-between time. The last few weeks we've been waiting for the departure of a beloved Senior Minister. Now, we are waiting for an arrival of our interim Senior Minister, Wendy Vander Hart.

This is the time for us to take a collective breath. (Breathe!) It is with this tenderness in mind, that our Journeying Together sermon series begins. For a few weeks, we'll focus on the journey we will take together during this in-between time.

I will be engaging Christine Valters Painter's book, *The Soul of a Pilgrim*, which is about the journey she and her husband took, moving abroad in midlife. Though Valters Painter names the realities of their outer journey, she focuses on the *inner* transformation that took place, and leads readers through practices she learned along the way. While the first chapters set up their journey, we begin with chapter 3, "The Practice of Crossing the Threshold."

Now I must tell you, I was at a threshold about 15 months ago, when I was discerning leaving a church community that I loved to come to this church community, that I didn't know, but thought I could love. (And I was right.) During that threshold time, I was in the midst of a year-long clergy leadership continuing education program. In one session of that program, we were invited into an intentional meditation that I want to invite us into this morning.

I know this can feel conspicuous, but I invite you to close your eyes for a moment. I can guarantee you that I felt silly doing it the first time, too. Here we go.

You're looking at a door in your mind. What does it look like? What color is it? Is it old, weathered, new, smooth, rough? What is it made out of? What does the handle look like? Now look around the door. What is around the door? Is it a wall or is there something else? When you look down to the bottom of the door, what is the ground or the floor like? What color is it? What does it feel like? Are you outdoors or indoors? *Take a moment* to register what you see, feel, sense. (Silence). Now open the door. (pause). What is inside it? Do you step up, step down, or are you on the same level? What do you see? What is the light like there? What smells or sights do you see? Are you drawn towards something as you've just gone through this door? Or are you content to stand in the doorway? Take a moment to seal that vision in your mind. (Pause).

Open your eyes. Maybe this guided meditation will be helpful for you, maybe not. But when I did it, it was transformative for me. Because it helped me discern the threshold I was standing in front at that time in my life. And I knew I needed to walk through it. And in walking through it, I arrived here.

I wonder what you saw.

Crossing the Threshold, Lauren Baske Davis, First UCC Northfield, 2.9.20

Dear First UCC, we are at a threshold. And when we find ourselves at a threshold, the first thing to do is simply stop and look around. Check in with ourselves. Thresholds, Valters Painter says, "aren't about figuring things out. When you explore these thresholds, it's about resting into mystery. They are liminal places where we release the old and the new has not yet come into fullness." And as uncomfortable as it may feel, being at a threshold isn't a time to figure things out. Rather, it's about staying present and being attentive. It's about noticing where we find ourselves, and where we notice God's presence.

It takes intention and time to take stock of where we are. It takes time to notice, and to not just react out of our own anxiety or emotions, to really look at where we are.

And so we *have* an opportunity before us right now, as we dwell in this next several weeks together. This is a time to be together. To engage our senses. To name our present experience. To hold ourselves and our dear community gently in grace. We are here for and with one another, held in the Spirit who is leading us, as we travel through this time together.

There is no better Psalm to travel with than Psalm 121. It's a Psalm for travelers. It would be sung by people in the Ancient Near East as they were on pilgrimage to festivals in Jerusalem. They would be taking roads through the hills and mountains of the Palestinian desert. And there, they would sing: "I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from [God], who made heaven and earth."

Now, we might hear those words as confident. As in, "my help comes from God, of course, as it always does. God has given me an incredible life and is with me. I trust that I know from where my help will come—God—the refuge and strength who has been there all along. The mountaintops are where God appeared to Moses, after all, and I look to the hills for that same abiding God." Some of us here may feel a similar confidence and faith.

Or we might hear those words as vulnerable. As in, a realistic expression of what it is to be on a journey. For ancient pilgrims like the ones who'd sing this psalm, the hills could be a dangerous place. A place where threat waited in the form of robbers hiding or creatures lurking. The place where life could be drastically changed or even completely fall apart. In this case, the question, "I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?" sounds honest and haunted. As in, "I see the dangers, I anticipate the threats, and I wonder, will anyone come help?" Maybe some of us resonate with that reading of it, too.

No matter how you experience these words, what I find most beautiful about Psalm 121 is that some scholars think that this psalm was meant to be a call and response. It would go like this: a solo voice would ask the question, "I lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?" Then from the collective voice of the community (because so often our faith grows from being in community,) the response would be sung by many voices: "My help comes from God." (2x)

Maybe you caught it, but this is when the psalm goes from first person to second person. From individual to communal—because sometimes we need our faith community to remind us where our help comes from—to remind us that, yes, there is someone who is coming to help, and that the same One who is coming to help is also the One who made the universe and the mountains. That that same One, is the One who gives us strength, who won't let us stumble, who will vigilantly watch over us, who shields us from the hot sun and shelters us in the moonlight, who guards us, guides us, and keeps us, now and always.

Crossing the Threshold, Lauren Baske Davis, First UCC Northfield, 2.9.20

This is good news for journeyers—but we're just at the threshold now—we're just setting out on our new journey, not even walking it yet. I invite us to carry Psalm 121 with us. How will we mark this time? What will we notice as we look around, crossing this threshold into this new time together in both grief and hope? How will we see what's around us, feel the feelings that are rising in us, and how will we move, trusting that God is a God of journeys? Let us notice these things so that we can feel what we need to feel, and also so that when the time is right, we can let go what we must let go of, and keep what we need to keep.

As a community of faith, we hold our doubts and our questions and our confidence with and for each other. God is with us, standing at the threshold and ready to lead us on a journey up ahead.

I lift my eyes to the hills. From where will our help come? Our help comes from God. Dear First UCC, God is with us and God is our help. Let us, together, be of good courage as we step through this threshold together. Amen.