

Singing to Each Other

Psalm 121

Home Moravian Church, Commitment Sunday, October 19, 2025

“I lift up my eyes to the hills.” I think of this line every time I’m at Laurel Ridge, our Moravian camp in the mountains. If you’ve been to Laurel Ridge, maybe you think of it, too. Maybe you, too, find joy in looking around at the mountains and feeling that strong sense of God’s presence there.

The psalm goes on to affirm that help comes from the Lord, and then to back up that statement with wonderful promises of God’s providential care. If you like memorizing scripture, this is a great psalm to memorize. That way, you have all these promises in your head all the time and can repeat them to yourself as needed. It is wonderful to hear, even from our own lips repeating to our own ears, that God will not let feet be moved—in other words, God won’t allow a stumble; that God watches without even sleeping; that God shades from harsh conditions; that God protects from all evil, *all* evil, all through life’s repeated routine of going out, and coming in, forevermore.

This is the God we worship; this is the God who leads us like a shepherd; this is the God, as we just sang, “whose giving knows no ending.” Because our God gives so freely, we are urged to be givers as well, in response and emulation. A classmate at Moravian Seminary years ago made an impression on me when she said, “You don’t give because God needs something. You give because *you* need to give.” We give, whatever we give, because we believe giving changes us. Giving is one of the practices that help us walk more faithfully in God’s way.

Metaphorically, we think of God's way as upward, probably because we tend to picture a heaven up there in the skies somewhere. We say of Jesus: "He ascended into heaven." If you look up Psalm 121 in your Bible, you'll see it has a heading: "A Song of Ascents." (As in "ascending"—going up.) Ascending, in this psalm, may not be just a metaphor. Every psalm from 120 through 134 is labeled a "song of ascent," and many scholars think these psalms were intended to be chanted or sung by a group on a pilgrimage—kind of like the songs you might sing in the car with children, only better, because instead of counting bottles of beer on the wall, you are reminding each other who God is and how God acts in the world.

Scholars assume that "a song of ascents" would be sung by people traveling upward. And the Bible tells us that once a year, the people of Israel go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They go *up* because Jerusalem sits high on a mountain. It's 2500 feet upward no matter which direction you approach it from. A whole lot of people probably need a whole lot of psalms to get them there.

Also once a year, generally in the fall, Home Church marks a "Commitment Sunday" when we reflect on our financial giving to the church. And every year, at least in the 12 years that I've been part of the pastoral staff here, the service for Commitment Sunday includes a kind of procession. Those who wish may come up the aisle and place their pledge card in this basket.

I've been asked why we do this procession. Are we glorifying money? Is it an opportunity for people to show off? If you have these concerns, maybe it helps to think of the procession as a little like an ascent to Jerusalem. It's a public commitment to our practices of faith; and it's something we do in a group, walking together in what we believe is God's way.

That may sound like a stretch. Can walking up a few yards of carpet really compare with the journey up the side of a mountain? Those ascending to Jerusalem know that God's way can be a hard road to travel.

After all: Would the psalmist want to assure the congregation of God's protection if the congregation faced no possibility of harm? Would the psalmist promise that feet will not stumble if the congregation were not aware that paths can be rocky? Would you need the Lord to "keep you from all evil" if evil did not exist?

How often do we miss the fact that the *second* line of Psalm 121, right after "I lift up my eyes to the hills," is a *question*: "From where will my help come?"

When the people chanting this psalm lift up their eyes to the hills, they see a hard journey ahead. Sometimes, we do, too. Sometimes, when we lift up our eyes to the hills, we are not necessarily happy Moravians gazing toward the Laurel Ridge horizon. Sometimes we're facing a big challenge, or trying to survive a terrible tragedy. Sometimes we're just exhausted. Sometimes we're just people of a certain age gazing up at a flight of stairs, at the top of which we have left our phone. We lift up our eyes to the *stairs*, and ask ourselves: "Can we do this again?"

Even the road to Laurel Ridge is not always easy. Maybe, like me, you're old enough to remember when the big charter buses that used to ferry campers up to Laurel Ridge could not make it all the way up the hill. At a certain point, the bus would just sigh to a stop, and all us campers would get out and walk the rest of the way, lifting up our eyes to the hills.

When I was about fifteen and a member of Raleigh Moravian Church, my youth group went up to Laurel Ridge for a retreat. Because the retreat was in February, it was plenty dark—in fact, totally dark—when we got there. And because the retreat was in February, the road to the camp was mostly under the snow, except where the snow had melted enough to create deep,

sucking mudholes. Nobody's car was getting up that road that night. What else could we do but get out of the cars, hold hands in line, and put one foot in front of the other, stumbling in the snow and sticking in the mud as we made our way up the mountain together in absolute darkness? There was no point in lifting our eyes to the hills; we couldn't see our hands in front of our faces. But we could feel our hands in the hands of others, and nobody let go; and we made it. I think maybe we lost one shoe.

Walking up the aisle with a pledge card on Commitment Sunday may seem like an easy thing. The walk itself is pretty easy—unless your mobility is challenged. And what about the commitment to financial giving? Depending on your circumstances, it could be pretty easy, or very difficult. And in any given year it may be more difficult for a different one or two of us, or for most of us, or sometimes even for all of us.

When we make this procession, committing publicly to financial giving, we don't know what the year will bring: illness? Job loss? Catastrophe? We don't actually *know* that we will be able to fulfill our pledge. Not one of us knows even whether we will live through the year. But we make our pledge in hope and trust that the Lord will provide. We also make it in a procession, *together*. It's kind of like we're holding hands in a line, walking up a muddy road in absolute darkness, because we have all committed to this walk. We make our pledge because we support this church, and we walk together because we support one another.

"From where will my help come" is a question, and not a rhetorical one. It has an answer: "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." There follows a list of all the ways God helps: not allowing feet to stumble, never sleeping on the watch, shading from sunlight that scorches or even moonlight, which the ancients thought could cause madness.

If, in this procession, we are all trying to walk in the way of God, then whatever God would do for each of us, we must also do for one another. If God will not let us stumble, then we must be ready to catch anyone whose foot is accidentally moved. If God does not sleep on the watch, then we who must sleep must at least take turns keeping watch for one another. If God is our shade from light that would harm us, we must be shade for one another; as the body of Christ, we are part of God's protecting hand.

"From where will my help come?" the psalmist asks, and then answers his own question: "My help comes from the Lord." But then something changes: It's no longer about how God helps *me*, but about how God helps *you*. "He will not let *your* foot be moved.... The Lord is *your* keeper, the Lord is *your* shade at *your* right hand... The Lord will keep *your* life." It's almost as if the psalmist, gazing up at that hard mountain road, is asking questions, and the ones answering the questions, reassuring him, praying for him, are the people walking with him. *Don't be afraid, they say. The Lord will keep your life, and we are making this procession together.*

We could say this to ourselves, for our own comfort and strength; but we could also say it to each other. What we could really use, as we make our procession, is a good song of ascent. The kind that makes the upward road a little easier. The kind that repeats the promises of God's providential care. The kind that encourages fellow travelers, and so encourages our own hearts.

For purposes of encouragement, I invite you all to take up your bulletin again, and find Psalm 121; and now I invite you to stand, and let's read it again together. But this time—if you are brave enough—I invite you to turn to someone nearby, and to read it to that person, looking at them, encouraging them with these words. Ready?

I lift up 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; the Lord will keep your life.

The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in

from this time on and forevermore.

On this commitment Sunday, let us commit not only to walking together, but to singing God's praises together; so that when we lift up our eyes, we know we can do this again—thanks be to God. Amen.