

“Trusting God”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 28, 2026

Psalm 121

A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love for God, our Neighbors, and Ourselves: Week Four

If memory serves, it was in January of 1981; I would have just started back at school for the second semester of 8th grade. That year, for Christmas, I had asked for and received a down vest, what we sometimes now call a puffer vest, not unlike the one Michael J. Fox, as Marty McFly, would wear in *Back to the Future*. I already had a winter coat, but in my head, I thought that a vest would go a long way in elevating my fashion game.

And then, not more than a couple of weeks later, it was gone. I got home one day after school and my mom asked where it was. I told her that, surely, I left it in my locker, but I really wasn't sure. Was it there? Or in the cafeteria, or the locker room? Or had I lost it?

So, I went outside to the driveway to do what I often did when I needed to focus my mind: shoot baskets. And I remember praying for God's help; that when I got to school the next day, the vest would, somehow, be easily found. I can't recall exactly what I promised to do on my end – be nicer to my younger brother or do my Algebra homework – but, in my teenage mind, this was what Gethsemane must have been like: one last, desperate plea to avoid having to face the music.

All four of the gospels somehow portray this Holy Week scene in which, before he is arrested, Jesus prays to God that the looming cup of suffering will pass. In some accounts, he is in a garden on the Mount of Olives called Gethsemane (which is a word that means “olive press”); in others, he designates three of his closest disciples (Peter, James, and John) to accompany him; in all of the so-called “synoptics” – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – Jesus asks them to sit in one spot while he goes to another to pray alone. Jesus returns, finding them asleep; so, he pleads for them to stay awake and pray so that they, themselves, would not

come into the time of trial. Jesus comes back and, once again, they are sleeping; he tells the disciples to get up because the hour has come and, as we soon discover, his betrayer has arrived.

It is unlikely and hard to imagine, given the timeline of events here, that Jesus ever had a chance to tell his disciples what, exactly, he prayed for while he was alone and the others were sleeping. The gospel writers assume that these prayers must have been for deliverance; that, if it was God's will, he would be spared of the betrayal and suffering that was to come. That we are told he prayed multiple times, and that even the sweat coming from his brow had become as thick as blood, indicates how deep his anguish was.¹

Each of us, at various points in our lives, face these Gethsemane moments; when all the dangers of this life's journey – physical, emotional, or spiritual; depression, doubt, or sin; injury, accident, or disease; corruption, extremism, or natural disasters – threaten to overwhelm us. These moments of deep anguish are articulated by the opening question of this morning's Psalm reading, "From where does my help come?" Thankfully, the answer comes right away, "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

Psalm 121 is a pilgrimage poem, entitled "A Song of Ascents." It asks the question of who will protect the pilgrims who must pass through mountains, hills, and other dangerous lands. Wild animals and marauders threaten attack in the lands through which the pilgrims must go. They must navigate enemy territory. Who will protect these pilgrims?

What is clear is that the help the psalmist seeks is the specialty of God. The word *ezer*, "help," which is familiar to some in the expression "Ebenezer" ("stone of help") in the hymn *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, is rarely used of humans, with very few exceptions. Verse 2 makes it clear that the psalmist's help does not come from the hills or from any person, but, rather, from the God who created them all.²

The psalm continues with the poetic characterization of the Lord as creator, who protects the path of the pilgrim and does not sleep but is steadfastly attentive,

¹¹ Alan Culpepper, *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary*, vol. IX

² Wil Gafney from *WorkingPreacher.com*

always awake and aware. The poetry reminds us that the Lord is steadfastly the help mentioned in verse 1. God is the keeper, the guardian, the protector.

One of the cherished possessions sitting in my office is an engraving that Pat Rescke – longtime member at Valley (also Bunny Kautzman’s mother and John’s mother-in-law) – made for me by pressing individual letters into plaster, spelling out the first two verses of this 121st Psalm. It reminds me of all those saints who came before us who, through their own various times of trial, looked to the hills and found their trust in God, their “ezer,” their help and keeper.

The imagery of sleep, that God neither slumbers nor sleeps and that God brings full protection by not even allowing your foot to be moved, is an affirmation that brings great assurance in the face of threat. It stands in stark contrast to the human frailty on display by the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane who, in the face of danger and adversity, could not stay awake. But, instead of casting blame on them, or losing hope himself, Jesus trusts in God to be with him at all times, in all circumstances; no matter how deeply those people or institutions around us might disappoint or fall short. We are, instead, to follow the example of Jesus who prays that God’s will would be done and trusts that the Lord will watch over, guard, and keep him.

One of the first times I ever came here to Valley was when Tim Jones was serving as your Interim Pastor and I was the new interim at a church in Highland Heights. I remember it was on a Thursday morning, and we ate left-over sausage and gravy over biscuits that Bob Banham had made for Men’s Prayer Breakfast. Tim told me that Bob was living in the manse and how, at one time, he had cooked for children and staff at the ABC daycare program in the upstairs of the barn building; and how – for Valley – he was so much more than a cook, or a sexton, or a member of the choir.

Bob Banham’s time living in the manse was only one of the many iterations of that building over the years and decades before and after. For Valley, first it was the manse, the home where the first two pastors lived. It also served as a home for refugees, for summer interns, and – for ten years – the Olsen family. It provided classroom space for children, confirmands, and adults. It hosted holiday parties and was once a youth center.

And, while we tried hard to imagine and looked for partners that might provide it with yet another purpose – and despite the diligent efforts of many church members, including the Olsens, to keep it standing – the condition of the building had deteriorated to the point that it would have been a colossal undertaking to bring it back to life. Structurally, it grew more dangerous and many of its systems were failing.

So, with mixed emotions, we contracted our friend Nick Donatelli to bring the manse down. After approximately a century and a quarter, the land that held this structure has been cleared and allowed to rest. And we continue to pray and discern that if, and when, there is a next use for that piece of our property, God – the creator and keeper of all the heavens and the earth - would guide our decisions.

The Psalmist tells us that God is a keeper. God's identity is to protect, watch over, guard, and keep. Like a watchman keeping guard over a city; like a mother bird shielding the young in the shelter of her wings. God promises to help you; to guard you on your journeys of life; as you go out and come in; as you face dangers in the day and the night.³

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Rolf Jacobsen from *WorkingPreacher.com*