

## WELCOME HOME

### Psalm 121

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This was preached on the first Sunday of the program year in which the congregation has great hopes that church will be able to have a full “program year” with minimal outbreaks of COVID.*

### SCRIPTURE

*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;  
he will keep your life.  
The Lord will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and for evermore.*

For many in our church and nation, this has seemed to be “The Week Everything Happened.”

- Yesterday I followed accounts of memorial services and early morning runs in memory of Eliza Fletcher, the young mother whose remains were found on Labor Day in Memphis, Tennessee, where she had been missing for two days after seen being abducted while jogging early in the morning. I have followed this sadness not only because I was raised in that city, but also because her father was one of 50+ classmates of mine at Memphis University School. Following family tradition, his daughter had graduated from the girl’s school adjacent to our all-boy’s campus. She taught at another girl’s school where my high school girlfriend had attended. She was abducted near the university where I took summer courses in Shakespeare and in state and local government to speed up my undergraduate education, and whose basketball team I madly cheered into the Final Four during my last year of high school during a rare moment of racial unity in that city. The Presbyterian Church in which her funeral service was held was the church of my childhood years. Every visual image I saw on cable news this week was of a school or church through whose halls I have walked or a major street down which I have driven countless times. In addition, the racial and sexual nature of the killing – including the unrelenting and stereotypical media attention that occurs when a young woman is killed – continues to haunt our nation and that particular city which was my home.

- Friday's sudden but not-so-sudden death of Queen Elizabeth II has caused our world to pause for a few days as we appreciate and sometimes long for the grace, decorum, and continuity of her seventy years on the throne. Seventy years of being a leader. Seventy years of being a head of state. Seventy years of being the bearer of ceremony, liturgy, tradition, identity, and even some sense of human unity beyond the differences of which we are so aware in our world.
- On the joyous side: My first day back in the office after nearly three weeks of vacation brought news from Nancy Hall Berens, our Director of Congregational Life, who, racing down the halls in delightful panic, announced: "We were hoping for 200 people to sign up for the bar-b-que, but over 300 have already signed up."
- On Wednesday afternoon, I walked down the hall from my office and stopped in to see children and parents gathered for children's choir. The rooms were filled. I saw parents I'd seen only intermittently over the past three years. I saw children singing in the *way they used to* sing in the *room* in which they *used to* sing *before* the pandemic. Even a mother and father whose most recent child had been born only four days earlier were there so their oldest child could sing in the children's choir at Westminster.
- And yesterday brought Maggie and I visits to two brief celebrations in the life of our congregation: a brunch which members of our Buildings and Grounds Committee gave in honor of Jim Buchanan, upon his retirement as our Facilities Manager after fourteen official years; and a 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party at Goodwin House for Lowell Fischer, one of our members who has outlived even the Queen.
- For the past several months, indeed, for the past two years, as we have sauntered forward with ministry in the most unusual circumstances of COVID, I have spent a lot of time thinking, mostly worrying, that the church will never be what it once was. But you are about to prove that we at least have a fighting chance; and that is what makes you so wonderful. That is what makes you such a joy to serve. I'll even preach a shorter sermon today so we can to the food! Even if you didn't make a reservation, please stay. We have plenty, and welcome home!

## II.

Yet all of this joy has occurred in a congregation which along with much of Alexandria has been reeling from the sudden death of KK McCart, one of the most respected and beloved parents in our congregation. She died suddenly last weekend on a trip with her husband and friends to the US Open in New York.

- KK was a vibrant and encouraging mother of children ages 14, 10, and 10. She was a devoted and energetic wife and daughter and sister, a leader not only at Westminster but also in local sports circles and activities at St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School.
- She was, perhaps *most of all*, a deep friend to people during times when they *needed* a friend.
- She was such a traditional Presbyterian. In the eleven years I knew her I only once succeeded her in getting her to call me "Larry" instead of "Dr. Hayward." Even then, she reverted to form the next time I saw her.

Tomorrow we will gather in what will surely be one of the largest memorial services in the history of this Sanctuary. We will gather to give thanks to God – for making the world richer for KK's presence in it – and to

bear witness to the promise of resurrection to which we cling during this at week in which everything happened. We will be “welcomed” to this “our home.”

### III.

One of the psalms to be read at tomorrow’s service speaks of the presence of God: long-sought, long-hoped-for, long-expected.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills [the psalmist says];  
[And then asks] from where will my help come?*

The hills in the opening line of the psalm refer to the hills that surround Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> From villages and countryside, from cities in which they had been born and cities into which they had come as foreigners and strangers, the Jewish people made pilgrimage – sometimes annually, sometimes once in a lifetime – to Jerusalem, the Holy City, the city atop whose highest mountain stood the Temple, the House of Worship, the House of God. “I will *lift up* my eyes to the *hills*.”

Pilgrimages are joyful occasions. We have made them from Westminster to Kenya and Europe and Israel and Alabama and North Dakota and Appalachia and Raleigh and Philadelphia. But pilgrimages are long and arduous as well: the weather is hot, the way is dry, the roads meander through desert and wilderness. Even as pilgrims make their way Jerusalem, they cannot help but wonder: “From *where* will my help come? *Where* will I find the presence of God? Will the Holy One indeed be my *help*?”

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By opening with this question, the psalmist acknowledges the *possibility* that God may not be found, or at least recognized, once the pilgrims arrive in the Temple. The psalmist acknowledges that deep in the heart of every worshipper lies a question: “What if it’s not true? What if it’s all a myth?”

But then the psalmist introduces a new voice – likely that of a priest – that *boldly* and *resolutely* moves in a different direction.

*My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.*

The Lord whose ways encompass all of creation, whose providential care watches over the good and evil, the bane and beauty, the falling of rain on the just and unjust is the same Lord, the psalmist proclaims, who offers help in the present, in the *here* and *now*, in the *situation* before us, no matter how overwhelming.

The voice continues:

*[The Lord] will not let your foot be moved  
[The One] who keeps you will not slumber.  
[The One] who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 437-438.

*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.*

Six times in eight verses the psalmist proclaims, “The Lord is our *keeper*.”

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Yet even as we hear these words, we know that we neither enter this world without pain nor leave it without sorrow; and along the way we know we will face days of tragedy and woe. In fact, when the psalmist refers to being “struck” by “the moon at night,” the reference is likely to a condition known in the ancient world as being “moonstruck,” a descent into madness.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the weight is simply too much for our hearts and minds to bear. “Struck...by the moon at night.”

Yet undeterred, the psalmist concludes:

*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 for evermore.*

It may seem counterintuitive, even offensive, to proclaim the presence of God in the midst of a week in which so many unfortunate things have happened. Yet notice the claim is that our being kept and guarded occurs “when we *come in*” and when we “*go out*.” It occurs “from *this time* – onward” and it lasts “for *evermore*.” The beauty and tragedy, the loves and losses we experience, the coming in and going out, life and death – all occur all the time under the *keepership* of God, “who made heaven and earth.”

#### IV.

So we make our own Ascent, our own pilgrimage, to the Temple, to the church we call home, to Westminster.

- Sometimes we come to *express* our sense of trust that God is our keeper.
- Sometimes we come to *nurture* that sense of trust.
- Sometimes we come seeking to *regain* it, to *repair* it, to *rehabilitate* it, to *restore* it, to *renew* it, to *remember* it.

When we arrive, we *sing* the songs, *recite* the prayers and affirmations, *listen* to the passages of scripture and the proclamation arising from those passages, *serve* the sick, the lonely, the poor, the imprisoned, and *share* the friendship and fellowship of the church, the food and frivolity.

So in this week in which everything has happened, welcome to the “keepership” of God. Welcome to Westminster. Welcome home.

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<sup>2</sup> Alter, 437-438.