

“A Home and a Horizon”
Psalm 121 & John 16:16-24
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My struggle with what to preach on the first Sunday back after the end of summer is kind of artificial these days when it falls on the second Sunday in August. I must admit it was a lot easier when that Sunday fell the Sunday after Labor Day when you're ready to get into the fall spirit of things. So I try to find a theme that will help us understand a bit of what we're going through both privately, personally and corporately as a community.

Fall brings a different rhythm of life. You go from the casualness of the summer to the strict rules of fall and all of a sudden life seems to get a little more important for some of us. For others it brings questions about who we are and what we are doing. Some people wonder why it is we get back into that routine. After all why can't I have the casualness of summer last into the fall? Some people think they need to get into a different line of work. Some people think they need get into a different family. It's not a new thing. It's been going on for eons.

The Psalmist is talking about that here in Psalm 121 and also the writer of John's Gospel is talking about what it means when life turns a corner. When things are all of a sudden going to be different for each of us.

Both our scripture lessons of the morning catch the thought that I have been wrestling with for the last few weeks in thinking about this sermon. The Psalmist is on his way to Jerusalem for one of the festivals. He has joined a band of pilgrims that are ascending the hills on their way "up" to the Holy City. They have left their own homes, the safety of home and village and neighbors, family and friends to head-on out to their religious horizon. In Psalm 121 is one of the pilgrim songs that they would have sung along the way. It's a Psalm and a song that reminds us of our sermon title and our sermon text, "A Home and a Horizon". They are marching forward to what God is leading them to, a horizon where they will meet God in the temple of the Lord. In John's gospel it is Jesus who is speaking of a home and a horizon. He is spending his last day with the disciples and he is telling them, "in a little while I will be with you no more," but then "in a little while longer I will be with you forever." What kind of muddled talking is that?

Both of the speakers in the scripture lessons are in a crisis. One is in a crisis of faith and the other a crisis of circumstance. The Psalmist feels threatened by all that is around him. He is out on a trail where bandits could spring upon them at any moment. Jesus is in a crisis of knowing that he will be leaving his best friends and they don't understand what he is trying to tell them.

Many of us have been through similar circumstances. Maybe not facing exactly these situations but you know what a family crisis is and wonder where to turn next. I think it was Robert Frost who said that human tragedy is like a tree that has fallen down to block your path. First, you have to cut away the little branches, then the larger ones and finally you can remove the trunk.

Frost says it is not there to block us permanently but to remind us of our mortality and to ask us who we think we are?

Sitting with a family some time ago in a wonderfully living room setting wondering what I was going to do I caught sight of all I needed. I looked out across the big bay window, pass the little guest cottage and across to the next hillside. The hills gave a gentle shelter to the valley below. As the Psalmist said one day, "To the hills I lift my eyes; from them shall come my help. It was the horizon I was looking for that day and the words came back to me, "Everyone needs a Home and a Horizon."

I don't know who first wrote them down; I first heard them from a friend. He said he read them in a book by Henry Coffin. And someone said that Dr. Coffin borrowed them from someone else. It really doesn't matter. But it is a haunting phrase if you ever catch it just right—A Home and an Horizon. Everyone needs a place to live and be and talk and walk and sing and dance and cry and have their hopes. Everyone needs a place to lay their head at night. Everyone needs the love of others and a kindly welcome. The world can be a lonely place. Oh, it can break your heart, can leave you empty, hollow and afraid, and twist your highest hopes and shoot them back as arrows. The world can be an awful place, with wars and sometime with us at war with ourselves and those we love. And dog-eat-dog and catch-what-can as we hurry on by to get the best of what we think we need and it we don't notice who we trample in the rush—as we press our noses against the windowpanes looking into Eden, but shoved away each time with cherubims with flaming swords.

You and I need respite from the maddening crowd. We need to find some moments of quiet time, a home to get away to. Pity those whose home is filled with turmoil. You and I need a home, but we need more than that we need a home and a horizon.

It is true from the moment we are born. Home in the life of a tiny baby is pretty easy to define: a crib, a room, a blanket, milk and food; but the horizon is there as well. And all through childhood and teenagers probably know it best of all, especially those who are leaving this week or next week or have already left for their journey into college or those starting their life's work. The home is there, the place to live, sometimes good and sometimes not so good. But the horizon beckons as well. And the college student knows it too, back and away and back again; looking, hoping, dreaming searching, rooting, finding, losing, growing, falling and rising again. Young couples know it. There is a home, a place to buy and furnish but on the horizon is a growing marriage and the hope for family, a deepening commitment, some goals to set and ways to get there.

Others know it too or should. Home can be a bleak place and awful sometimes; but the horizon out on yonder hill is there. "If you have hope or memory," Kierkegaard once said, "you cannot be unhappy."

And oh, it is true maybe most of all, when we come down near the end of the road. Still you need a home, people to love you, a place to recall the goodness God has given you and the hope that, on looking back, pray God you found the life you chose, that it all has been worthwhile. But the horizon is the more important now, the place that marks the boundary where you and I can see,

where our pilgrimage takes departure from the earth itself, to the unknown but waiting future. You need that vision, friends, for where there is no vision, the people perish.

I love the way our Psalm begins, *I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help*. . . . We can take the image that the Psalmist was working and apply it to the north Georgia mountains just out of our sight at the moment. The pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem would camp in the valleys with the hills rising up around them.

At night they would place sentinels, watchmen, out on the hills at dusk when darkness began to fall. It was comforting to the people in the valley to look up on the hill and see the watchman looking out for their safety. We all can sleep a little easier when we know someone is watching over us.

I remember the story of the woman who lived in England during the German bombing blitz. Every night the bombs were coming in and people were sleeping many nights in air raid shelters. So someone asked her, “Do you have trouble sleeping these nights?” She replied, “Oh, no, not at all.” The interviewer was puzzled because he had heard many stories of people fatigued from not enough sleep. So he asked her what her secret was. She said, “Well, it says in the Bible that the Lord neither slumbers nor sleeps and so I didn’t see any sense for the two of us to stay awake.”

I can picture the writer of this Psalm as being one of those pilgrims who for years had journeyed up to the holy city. While on that yearly journey one starry night as he came outside just before retiring to pull the tent flap down, he gazes up and in the full moonlight he catches a glimpse of the sentry at his post watching over the camp. But all of a sudden he sees something greater than just the lone sentry. He senses that something deeper and higher was going on. Above the hills he envisioned another watchperson. One far more powerful and enduring; One high and lifted up; One who never takes His eyes off of you and me; One who slumbers not nor sleeps. *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence, cometh my help*. And where does it come from?

Where did my help come from? *My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth*. In other words from the One who made it all, the One who formed the starry heavens knows you and me by name, that one is riding high above the earth, circling to and fro. And when you have to walk a lonesome valley, as everybody does from time to time you do not have to walk it by yourself, you need to hold out your hands, and Christ will be there to walk it for you.

And it is time for the marvelous 16th chapter of John’s gospel. “A little while,” Jesus said, “and you will see me no more.” Oh, that’s for sure. A little while becomes littler with the passing of the years, and time keeps slipping away. A little while and the grass grows-up and withers away. A little while, as one told me not long ago, it is like a series of hello’s and goodbyes. You get all settled in, and it is time to go. Oh, how those three years had flown by since first they were with him. And when the time comes Jesus says, “you will weep, weep and lament.” But like a woman in travail, in the labor of giving birth to a child in a little while she no longer remembers the anguish—Jesus Christ is speaking—for the joy of a child that is born into the world. “So you have sorrow now,” he says, “But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will ever take your joy away again....”

A little while, and the hour is coming when you will be scattered. A little while, and wars and rumors of war, and a little while and the sun will eventually die out, and darkness will rule the deep. A little while and the trilobites may rule the earth and sea again. But, "I have this to say to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world."

I remember as a teen going to a church camp in south central Pennsylvania near Carlisle called Camp Michaux. It had been a prisoner of war camp for German & Japanese soldiers during WW II. Then in 1946 the Presbyterians bought it and turned it into a church camp. It was right off the Appalachian Trail. You could strike out on the trail just a few feet from your barracks-like sleeping accommodations. But the real beauty of the place was the chapel. It was on the side of a hill that, of course, looked across a valley to another hill. It was comforting either early in the morning just as the sun was rising to go up to the outdoor chapel and watch the first light of the day change the color of the hill on the other side from moment to moment until the sun got all the way up. And it was comforting in the evening as we were listening to the speaker at twilight and drawing inspiration not only from the words but the sight behind him. Years before someone had gone out on that other hill and had made a little clearing. And in the middle of that clearing had erected a single cross.

It stood there as a single sentinel, a watchman, in one regard to remind us who we are and whose we are. It stands there just as the hardwood forest around it has stood for centuries and eons. The hardwood forest were tall and green: oak and hickory, hemlock firs and poplars, beech trees and some sassafras, and Oh, Lord God Almighty, out on the horizon, where they had stood for a hundred million years or more (give or take a couple million) were the outriders from the Appalachian range, traveling south to Georgia.

They are a reminder that the Lord watches over all of us. He will watch over us until that day comes, and come it surely will, when we ascend that other hill, peek up and over and down the other side, to the plain and level lands, where mountains and hills before you shall "break forth into singing, and all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands. Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle. And it shall be to the Lord for an everlasting sign which shall not be cut off." (Isaiah 55)

When we stand there beside the author of this Psalm and listen to the picture he has painted for us, as we stand there listening in silence for what it says to us, as we stand there in silence . . . the silence will speak to us . . . "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." We need the immensity of that vision of that home and horizon . . . for now and evermore. Listen . . .