

**PROTECTOR, DEFENDER; PSALM 121, GENESIS 12:1-4, JOHN 3:16-17; 3.8.2020;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

There's spot on the eastern side of Lake Winnepesaukee half way up the lake and a mile out into the water where on a clear day you can see Mt. Washington – 80 miles due north. It's a remarkable sight – this tallest peak in the Northeastern United States and the most topographically prominent mountain east of the Mississippi where non-tornado winds have been clocked at 231 mph.

What you see is a series of mountain ranges smaller to higher, like our men arranged on these risers, with Mt. Washington of the Presidential Range furthest away, looming over all the others, its massive shoulders and arms sloping down and around the other ranges as if gathering them up in its outstretched arms.

Even at that distance you feel that you are in the presence of something holy, something sacred, something transcendent. "If I lift up my eyes unto the hills," asks the psalmist, "from whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth." This psalm embodies the human tendency to see or think of the divine as elevated, while the forces of death and evil are depressed into the earth. The setting is what makes the psalm so relevant and a comforting choice for those who are facing death; it is the prayer of a pilgrim journeying to the holy city who lifts up his eyes to Mt. Zion from his location south, near the Dead Sea before the road rises into the dangerous hill country inhabited by robbers and bandits through which he must journey to get to Jerusalem.

When you look upon something in nature as majestic as Mt. Washington there is the accompanying feeling of safety and wellbeing not in the mountain per se or the sequoia or the eagle but in this:

that the Creator God who brought the mountain or tree or raptor into being is also a compassionate God who protects and defends us; a God who ushered Israel out from the slave labor camps of Egypt, led them through the wilderness and into a promised land. A God who unless I miss my guess has led you out of times of trouble back to safety just as he has led me.

Scholars call this Creation Theology – meaning the confidence of ancient Israel that the *creator God* was also the God who saved the people from perils in the past. It is a foundational plank of Hebrew Scripture. Here it is in the words of Second Isaiah: "He who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth...who gives breath to its people and life to those who walk on it. I the Lord will take hold of your hand; I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, free captives from prison, and release from dungeons those who sit in darkness."

Here is the pilgrim again: "If I lift up my eyes unto the hills from when cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth." For him present help and past creative power radiate from the same divine source.

Be not mistaken, this is not some dry proposition of faith but a prayer that is the only thing standing between this pilgrim and desperation.

It is not a question to debate or bull session over beers it is the first step this pilgrim takes in his heart before he takes the next step with his feet.

We are on a journey in Lent to the holy city, to Jerusalem, with Jesus as he makes his way from the mount of Transfiguration in Galilee to the city where he will be arrested, tried and executed.

It is not a time for singing Alleluias; it is not a time for flowers and celebration – hence our stark arrangement of pussy willows. Lent is a time for sober contemplation; for taking our personal inventory to see what it is that we need to let go of or what to embrace to make this journey as faithfully as we can.

It is a time to lift up our eyes and remember that our help comes from the Creator God and not from ourselves—even in this self-help, secular age of skepticism; this age of scientific hubris—not from the scientists who themselves are driven to agnosticism if not belief by the mysteries of nature—but from those whose faith is in the scientific method that answers in the end only the question of how and not of why. Lent is a journey into the question of why; into greater dependence upon the God of Creation; greater awareness as the days pass, that left to our own devices we would likely start building Towers of Babel or golden calves that would illustrate the foolishness of the wisdom of the world and merely signal our demise.

We are also on a journey in our nation this Lent; our nation and world in the throes of an impending pandemic; Wall St. in disarray in the wake of a virus spreading like wildfire; and waiting for enough testing kits, let alone a vaccine, for some means to control a disease that seems to spread spontaneously before we can contain it. Not to mention a national political climate that did a 180 degree turn in less than forty-eight hours last week; a campaign season that is fraught with fears of Russian interference and flawed voting systems.

Then there is climate change—a reality that permeates the news cycle with its irreversible melting of ice caps and heating of the oceans that are our last defense against literally burning ourselves and the planet up.

Or perhaps you are on some personal journey to a face to face encounter with the forces of darkness; a medical diagnosis, or job loss, or relationship in tatters. Lent peels away the thin veil of denial, strips back our make-believe bravado so that we see clearly our frailty and need; all the more motivation then to rely on this protector, defender God.

Here's the good news today: God calls Abram and Sarai to leave the land of their ancestors and go to a new land that he will show them; Jesus tells the Rev. Dr. Nicodemus whose faith occupies more of his head than his heart: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him."

And the psalmist today depicts the vigilance of this God who saves, protects and defends: "He will not let your foot slip he who watches over you will not slumber, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."

And because this is a God who never takes his eye off of us, who watches us day and night, the psalmist can say: "the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night; the Lord will keep you from all harm; he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and your going both now and forevermore."

Those who trust in a God who never sleeps can claim this wrap-around care and protection. Such are the times we live in that we need a God who never slumbers or sleeps! With all the threats of chaos rearing its head in the emergence of a pandemic, in a climate that tells of a dying world, in a political scene that skates on the thin ice of a polarized populace; and in the periodic threats if not of chaos of some form of suffering in our personal lives; we need a God who never slumbers or sleeps to keep watch over us.

Our son will share with me, if he is in the right mood, his experience in Afghanistan as a staff sergeant in charge of a squadron of four strykers or small tanks. Their mission either on land or when they were dropped from planes to parachute into the far reaches of Kandahar Province was to sweep Taliban villages where they suspected bomb makers at work or to track and surveille suspected terrorists.

What I learned from Doug is that when those officers—commissioned and non-commissioned—went on such missions which lasted from 36 to 96 hours—they never slept. In other words, the team leaders who were responsible for the mission and the wellbeing of their troops never dozed off but were always awake, on the lookout for danger. Whether in their vehicle or at camp with night shifts, the commander of the unit large or small was awake; radio headset on, scanning the monitor in the stryker or the landscape at camp. Doug said you could not trust the privates who would fall asleep even during their turn on the watch. So we stayed awake, he said. Can you imagine a God who never sleeps? Who watches out for us 24/7? Who keeps his eye on lurking danger while we sleep, when we are vulnerable?

Well that's the God we have today; that's the God who watches over and protects little Violet whom we just baptized and all of our children;

that's the God who watches over and protects you and me carrying whatever burdens we carry of family or career or health;

and that's the God who shows up for the fight against the forces of evil and darkness that threaten the planet with climate disaster or threaten the human race with lethal viruses or that threaten the cherished values and rights of our democracy with foreign adversaries and errant leaders.

That's the God who protects and defends.

When we saw Mt. Washington last summer at that spot on the lake about half the size of this sanctuary, and that looks through islands on either side through a visual path to that majestic peak 80 miles away it was a perfect day.

No clouds hanging over the New Hampshire landscape, no 231 mile an hour winds to obscure our view. Just that grand 6300 foot mound of granite covered with pine forest wrapping its arms around the horizon as if to say you are safe, you are in my care, I am watching over you.

We stopped for a few minutes, bobbed in the water with the engine idling, staring at the mountain on a rare, perfectly cloudless day. That's what we're doing this morning here in Lent; we stop to look and listen to what this psalm tells us; and what it says is "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore." Amen.