

**“SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME”**

*Psalm 121*

Rob and Helen chose the Psalm we read in the dedication part of the service this morning, and it's a great choice for an occasion like this, as we'll see in a bit. Some – many? – of you here this morning will be familiar with it, or, at least, with bits of it. Like so many other Psalms, it has familiar phrases in it – the opening lines, for example, which have inspired many a hymn and song. It's one that we return to time and again because it has that sense not only of familiarity, but also of comfort. Even today, centuries after it was written, it speaks peace into the reader's soul and has that underlying assurance that we all feel we need at certain times in our lives – and particularly when staring off in life, or in some new direction.

If you look at the little subtitle that it has been given by the editors of our Bible, you'll see that it's called “*A Song of Ascents*”. It is one of a series of Psalms thought to have been sung by Jewish pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem for one of the regular festivals of their faith. As they set off to travel towards their holy city on foot and by donkey, they would have seen not only Mount Zion but the neighbouring hills shimmering in the distance and given thanks to the God who had protected them on their journey. So it's an appropriate Psalm to use today as we recognise that Evelyn is setting off on her journey of life – and, indeed, Rob and Helen are setting off on the exciting and daunting journey of parenthood. “Journey” is probably a much-overused word these days: everyone on the *X-Factor* or any of those talent shows seems to be on some kind of incredible journey, but when it comes to setting out on life, the idea of a journey is a pretty good metaphor. And Rob, Helen and Evelyn are all going to need some help and advice – which will no doubt be delivered in fulsome measure by grandparents, aunties and other wise women (and possibly men).

The writer of this Psalm starts off by looking up to the hills for help. The Hebrew word for “*help*” here has the idea of divine help about it and many people of that time would have been looking up to the hills for it because that's where they thought the gods lived, that's where the “high places” were, the shrines where they worshipped their gods. But the poet realises immediately that help doesn't come from those false gods, those idols, those deities of human construction, but from “*the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth*”. There's no point looking at the hills, but at the One who made them. Look beyond creation at the Creator. Look to God himself for the help and protection you need.

And protection would have been needed. Some of the dangers of the journey are mentioned in these verses, and there were others as well – the threat of brigands and bandits, of ill health, of bad weather, of getting lost even. We read in these verses of slipping feet (v3), not only a metaphor for encountering bad

luck as it's used in other Psalms, but also literally the danger of slipping and turning an ankle or breaking a limb on the rough, dusty roads leading to Jerusalem.

We read of the possibility of sunstroke and of the dangers of the moon (v6). Some have suggested that the moon is mentioned because it was thought to be responsible for lunacy – that's the root of the word (like "lunar"). (It's interesting that the scientists of this area – Darwin, Priestley, Wedgwood and the others who met in Darwin's house on Beacon Street in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and who formed the Lunar Society – were known as Lunatics, without any opprobrium attached to that word. They met when there was a full moon so they could see their way home more easily.) Others have said that the moon in the Middle East could actually cause a form of moonstroke, which caused temporary blindness and facial distortion. It's mentioned in a number of Victorian commentaries which quote from travel guides to the region.

Travel in the time of the Psalmists was not a trouble-free affair and for many people, for whom a pilgrimage to Jerusalem was possibly the only time they'd left the familiarity of their immediate environs, it was a worrying and fearful undertaking. But as the pilgrims approached their destination, they would have scanned the horizon and seen (as we've said) the great bulk of Mount Zion, on which Jerusalem was situated, rising out of the range of surrounding hills. And as he sees it, the Psalmist asks rhetorically, "So who's going to help me get there?" The answer he gives himself is that the LORD will help him, the LORD who created the sun and moon, the LORD who created both the rocky paths and the fragile feet which walked on them, the LORD who watched as he left his home and as he arrived at the Holy City. He is there all along, never taking his eyes off the traveller and his companions – and he will always be there, watching and protecting his people, wherever they may be.

And that is clearly the main idea in this Psalm. I don't know if you noticed, but the verb "*to watch*" is used five times in this short poem. I must admit, I hadn't really noticed it until I was reading through the Psalm in the NIV in preparation for this morning. Maybe I usually use another version, or have the words of a metrical version in my head, or still remember the old Authorised Version translation or the Prayer Book version which, curiously and unaccountably, uses more than one word to translate what, in Hebrew, is the same word. In English, "to watch" can have different nuances. We watch television. We watch a sports event. We watch our language. We watch out for danger. We have – or used to have – watchmen who have a protective role as well. It's that last sense which this particular Hebrew word usually has.

I won't go into all the details this morning, but the word used here is the word that means watching out for danger and it has a kind of protective nuance to it. The LORD is like a watchman, alert to any kind of attack, any kind of danger. He watches and guards his people. And just like a conscientious watchman, the LORD keeps awake and alert. The watchman who sleeps would soon be demoted and disciplined, but

there is no danger of that with God. He “*neither slumbers nor sleeps*” – he doesn’t even doze for a moment is what that phrase means. (The parents of young babies often feel they neither slumber nor sleep, but it will get better for a few years, until you find yourself staying awake again waiting to hear her come in late at night.) The anxious pilgrim need have no fear, for God is there to ensure that any danger is headed off. That’s at the root of the thought in the other Psalm we read this morning, *Psalm 139* – and there it reminds us that God was watching over Evelyn even before her birth.

And the LORD cannot sleep because the enemy never sleeps. As we read in the New Testament, in *1 Peter 5:8* we are told that “*Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*” I remember being at a School Governors’ Meeting once when the local authority inspector was telling us about Ofsted’s current preoccupations in looking at schools and he said that the in word at present is “relentless”. (Some of you will have sensed that about Ofsted for many years but now they recognise it themselves!) The enemy of God’s people is relentless, always looking for occasion to cause harm to his prey, but “*the LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life,*” says the writer here (v7).

And not only is that the case in the immediate situation – for these pilgrims it was travelling up to Jerusalem – but it is the case for all eternity: “*both now and for evermore*” (v8). Wherever he was – wherever we are – we can have complete confidence in God, who watches over us, not like some celestial Big Brother (in the *1984* sense), but as a constant bodyguard.

Now, for some of us – many of us – that may be the bigger fear: being aware of the “*evermore*”, of what happens after the journey of this life has come to an end. There will be immediate difficulties in the here and now, as it were – all kinds of anxieties about our resources, our health, our jobs, about Evelyn’s development, about the short-term and long-term future, many of which will turn out to be unnecessary. But deep within all of us is that worry – often unarticulated or even unacknowledged – about meeting our Creator. The writer of the Old Testament book of *Ecclesiastes* says that God has “*set eternity in our hearts*”. It’s there, deep in our subconscious.

But God has got that sorted out too. The God who watches over us and preserves us and protects us on our journey through this life will continue to do that on into eternity. And he has shown that ultimately and amazingly in what he did through Jesus Christ. “*The Maker of heaven and earth*” who put it all together so perfectly in the beginning (however you understand that), who created a world that operated with unity and harmony, free from danger and distress, watched as evil seeped in and spoiled it, as his much-loved creation was exposed to harm and hurt. And he determined to put it right, to restore it to its original pristine security and safety. The only way to do it – in a way that we cannot ever fully

understand – was through the death of his Son Jesus. Jesus, the Messiah, hung out to die on a rough wooden cross on a hill outside Jerusalem, took on the forces of evil and won, so that all people in all places and for all time could be assured that God is really watching out for them.

If you want to lift your eyes to the hills, then that's the hill to look at. Not at the places where the false gods lurk, not at the things which promise much but deliver nothing, but at the hill on which God definitively demonstrated his astonishing love for us. Look at that and be assured that you matter to God, that Evelyn matters to God, and that he will always be watching over you.

Regularly expressing our confidence in God and thanking him for his protection when things are going well – as the Psalmist was doing as he neared the end of his pilgrimage and as we have been doing here in our worship this morning – helps us to turn to him for help and protection when things are not going quite so well. And it invites us to turn to him for protection for the eternal future as well, to believe that *“he will watch over your life ... over your coming and going both now and evermore”*. May we all know that security in our own lives and may Evelyn come to know it too as she grows in the love and nurture of Rob and Helen and her wider family.

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### **Questions to think about and discuss**

- 1) In what "false gods" do people seek protection today? Where do people look when they need help and reassurance?
- 2) Does the idea that God is constantly watching over you comfort you or worry you? Why?
- 3) Our experience doesn't always suggest that God "*keeps us from **all** harm*". So what does the Psalmist mean here?
- 4) How can thanking God for his help when things are going well give us confidence when things go wrong?

5) What is your reaction to this Psalm? Have you found it particularly helpful at any time?