

Psalm 121*Fourth Sunday in Lent (Series A)***Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 42:14-21; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41****The God Who Was, Who Is, and Who Will Be There!**

March 22, 2020

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does 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. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on 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 forth and forevermore.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

It is impossible to escape the feeling that our world has changed forever. Only a few days ago, the biggest concern on the minds of many people was what they were going to have for supper that night. But we live with a new normal now. Stores are closed, or at the least having very reduced hours. Schools, gyms, theatres are all closed. There are no professional sports being played, and recreational sports are on hold. Offices are empty, as many staff work from home. Grocery stores only let in so many people at a time, and certain products like hand sanitizers are chronically out of stock. Morning traffic reports speak of clear roads; people are even driving on the Deerfoot at 100 kph! The new watchword is social distancing, because we are avoiding all contact with people, lest they be a source of COVID-19. The fact that we are doing our service this way, as a live media stream, rather than gathering together in person, is a reminder that things have changed, and will be different for the foreseeable future.

As the world searches for answers and meaning in all of this, we can find comfort and strength in the wonderful assurances that our God gives us in His Word. In this world of sin, suffering, pestilence and death, there is One who watches over us and protects us. Even as we journey through the troubles and trials of this world, where the devil and his evil host works to destroy us, God is our hope and confidence. He is the God who was, who is, and who will be there in all the times of our need and fear; in all of our life, and in the face of death.

Everyone seems to feel that the world has changed, and even after COVID-19, nothing will be the same again, But has the world changed? It is true that nothing like this has ever happened in my lifetime, or even in the memories of the oldest of our members. Yet there have been times when disease and plague had an even greater impact on our world. While the World Wars did not have the same devastating effects here in North America, we do have members and family who lived in the heart of the conflict; who saw the impact of war on their communities, their families, and their homeland. Yes, we may feel differently about our lives in this world, but in point of fact, the world hasn't changed. It is the same sin-filled, troubled and uncertain world that has existed since the fall into sin in the garden of Eden. The day that Adam and Eve turned from God to follow the desire of their own hearts—that was the day that the world truly changed, and sadly, it changed in a way that leads to such things as pandemics, terrorism, war, hatred and all that brings pain, despair and fear into our world.

You and I have to live in this corrupt, evil and imperfect world every day. Thankfully, we have a Protector, a Guardian who is aware of—and concerned about—all the things that we must face day by day. In our text, the psalmist reminds us that the all-powerful God, the very God who created the heavens and the earth, is at work for our good in this evil world. In the wonderful words of this psalm, we are counselled to put our trust in God in the midst of all the circumstances, trials and uncertainties of our lives. Five times in this short psalm, we are told that the Lord watches over His people. The word for watch can better be translated “guard”. God guards His people. He protects them in the midst of the dangers and perils of this world. His protection involves every step we take: ***He will not let your foot be moved. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.*** This Lord, who is with us on the way is ever-present, especially in the face of evil or trouble. The psalmist assures us: ***The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.*** He is on duty day and night, 24/7 as we say. He doesn't sleep or become distracted; He doesn't take a holiday from us. He doesn't self-isolate or distance Himself from us, even though He has every reason to do that because of our sin. He is our help, our shield and our deliverer in all things. He is with

us as we go throughout the day, to keep us from harm and danger, and He watches over us as we sleep.

There was no shortage of potential texts for this sermon today. Again and again God assures us in His Word of His help, His presence and His deliverance. In our Old Testament lesson today, God declares to us through Isaiah: ***“And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them.”*** (Isaiah 42:16, ESV) Jesus Himself says: ***“behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*** (Matthew 28:20, ESV) Our dear Saviour assures us that God watches over us and that the very hairs on our head are numbered. We have some wonderful proof of this in the Bible, such as Daniel in the lion’s den, when God closed the mouths of the lions to protect Daniel. Or what about the time King Nebuchadnezzar threw Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego into the fiery furnace? In spite of the illogic of a human being surviving in the midst of the heat and flames, they not only survived—they came out totally unharmed; not even a hair was singed! God was watching over them.

But God did not close the lion’s mouths when Nero threw the early Christians into the Colosseum. Nor did God prevent the flames from consuming the persecuted faithful who were turned into human torches to light the streets of Rome. God can reach out His mighty hand and remove every trace of COVID-19 from those infected. He can sterilize the world in ways we could never hope to do. But He hasn’t. Does this mean that God isn’t watching over us? Doesn’t He care for those who are ill the way He cares for others? Is He punishing people for their sins?

I don’t think we can even begin to speculate about God’s purposes in all things. In a world where sin afflicts and affects every heart—and yes, that means your heart and mine, too—we are going to see the consequences and evils that sin brings into our lives. God does not promise that He will take away everything that makes our lives uncomfortable. We still have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. What God does tell us is that He is with us every step of the way. He is still the guardian of our lives, working for our deliverance.

The safety that God promises is not the safety of this world. It is the greater deliverance from sin and its eternal consequences. It is never a pleasant thing to see what sin has brought into our world, or to see the frailty of this earthly existence. I keep thinking of the words of that wonderful hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*: ***“With might of ours, can naught be done; soon were our loss effected.”*** (LSB 656, st. 2) In spite of all the efforts that have gone on, there are still those who get sick, and those who die. Does that mean that evil will win? It would win, if it were not for the cross of Jesus Christ. Our strength cannot overcome sin’s power. But as the hymn continues, *But for us fights the valiant One, Whom God Himself elected. Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, Of Sabaoth Lord, And there’s none other God; He holds the field forever.* (LSB 656, st. 2)

God Himself does battle for us over all the powers of darkness, as Jesus gives Himself for us on the cross. There, at the cross, the real battle against all evil, all disease, all wickedness, all death was fought—and won! In Jesus Christ, God comes to rescue and deliver His people. He suffered all the attacks of the devil, to set us free from death and hell. As terrible as the COVID-19 virus may be, it is nothing compared to all that Christ endured. In His passion we see true suffering—suffering greater than that of all who mourn right now, suffering greater than anything we can imagine. But that cross is our assurance of a love that watches, guards and protects us in all things. The cross assures us that God is right here, in the hospitals and care facilities; in our homes and in our social isolation. As we contemplate what the “new normal” will be, God assures every frightened heart: ***“Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”*** (Joshua 1:9, ESV)

Our help comes from the Lord—from the Lord who paid the great price for our sins through His death on the cross. Thankfully, we move from the cross to the empty tomb. We see in the resurrected Lord all that is ours because He has won the victory for us. Death is not the end. Life in its fulness, in the glory of God’s kingdom awaits us through faith. We already sang that wonderful hymn, *“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”*. I encourage you focus on the words like never before. Each verse is a wonderful assurance of victory in Christ. It is the assurance of forgiveness and life that is greater than all the evil and sin the devil and his minions can cause. It is the same confidence that we hear through the inspired writer: ***“So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”*** (Hebrews 13:6, ESV)

It is hard not to be filled with fear in all the changes we see around us. That is why we poor sinners need to turn to the Lord in humble confession, and give ourselves into His gracious care and keeping. That is why we need to continue the proclamation of God's good news to all people—especially to a world that cannot understand how a loving God could let things like this happen. There is no certainty, no safety in this world or the things of this world. But we are safe and secure through faith in the God who promises us that, as He always has been, so He will continue to be there in each and every moment of your life. In that sure and certain hope, the psalmist wrote: ***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 forth and forevermore.*** And His power, strength and wisdom will always be enough to save those who trust in Him. Amen.