

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd
Austin, Texas
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
September 27, 2009
Proper 21 (Year B): Psalm 124, Songs of Ascents

I invite you to join me in Psalm 121, found in your Book of Common Prayer on page 779.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills; *
from where is my help to come?
My help comes from the Lord, *
the maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved *
and he who watches over you will not fall asleep.
Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel *
shall neither slumber nor sleep;
The Lord himself watches over you; *
the Lord is your shade at your right hand,
So that the sun shall not strike you by day, *
nor the moon by night.
The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; *
it is he who shall keep you safe.
The Lord shall watch over your going out and
your coming in, *
from this time forth for evermore.*

Amen.

I think with an eraser. Which is to say, my mind, when it wanders, thinks with a pencil (probably a number two lead) as opposed to a paintbrush, a musical scale, or a camera's shuttered eye. I blame the condition on the academy and the repeated instruction to articulate my thoughts and feelings *in words*, and not just words but the written word, complete with punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and effective dialogue and description. Sometimes my written tendency falls into my speech so that I will actually speak my grammatical thoughts as I think them: Guns the-letter-N apostrophe Roses comma the greatest rock band of all time comma has surely shaped me well period

However, the process does not come naturally to me, and, as a result, I spend much of my contemplative time in revision: erasing and restarting, erasing and restarting again, thinking about myself thinking about myself thinking. The habits of my head simply won't tolerate undisciplined thinking. Asking questions of myself about motivation, inclination, preference, and conformity, I constantly revise my thoughts to better articulate my "real" feelings.

Regrettably, I ferry this way of fettered thinking into my prayer life, and, for the sake of clarity and propriety, I can lose hold of authenticity in my prayer to God...*for the sake of clarity and propriety, I can lose hold of authenticity in my prayer to God.* I revise my conversation with God to conform to the standards of English grammar and even polite etiquette that I have learned well. Much to the delight of God, I'm sure, I fear that I am, in this way, perfecting a passive-aggressive spirituality.

The Psalms know no such bondage to propriety. Or perhaps more to the point, the Psalms privilege honesty above politeness, and we inherit those authentic expressions in our Psalter. The vast majority of Psalms are laments, and the authors hold back little in their protest to God. Psalm 12 articulates, with some clarity, an author who's sick of it all: "Help, O LORD, for there is no longer anyone

who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind” (Psalm 12:1-2). I guess that’s one way to say it.

Other psalms express praise of God, speak to the comfort and safety of God’s protection, and still others challenge God and the judgment suffered by an individual, all expressed with a striking, vulnerable honesty. Our inheritance in the Psalter incorporates both the original circumstance of the author, and how that expression has since functioned in the life of Israel and in the life of the Christian community. That is to say, we can set our petitions, unfiltered and unrevised, the most authentic concerns and thanksgivings of us, in conversation with not only the Psalmists’, but the communities of their faithful across time. The Psalter does not conform or limit our thinking and prayer as an Emily Post; rather, the Psalms invite our situation and our honest expressions into conversation with those who have ferried across history their relationship with God. Rather than revise us to fit a form, the Psalter conjoins us with a diverse and rich inheritance that, prayed holistically over time, will compel us to a range of human emotion, seasons of expression, over the course of a lifetime of faith.

Psalm 124, which we sing this morning, is one of fifteen – numbers 120 through 134 – which all begin with the title “A Song of Ascents,” and which likely form a unity composed by a single author (Goulder 1). In addition to these psalms noteworthy brevity, the set also contains a number of repeated phrases, including “let Israel now say” (124:1, 129:1) and “who made heaven and earth (121:2; 124:8; 134:3), both of which appear in Psalm 124, and the is in theme and form from those psalms preceding and succeeding them. The Songs, then, likely once formed a separate collection, added to a Psalter which once concluded with Psalm 119.

While the particular meaning of the title, “A Song of Ascents” has received no scholarly consensus, the “going up” that the title implies, and the theme of journey that the Songs contain, propose the designation “pilgrimage psalms” (Limburg 181). While some scholars have argued that the set as a whole comprises three stages of a journey: Psalms 120-122, concerning the setting out; Psalms 123-132, concerning the arrival at Mount Zion, either a literal or figurative destination; and 133-134, concerning the farewell; I find more compelling the notion that Songs of Ascents speak more generally to our faith pilgrimage, as individuals and as a community.

As James Limburg observes, “The imagery in these psalms is taken from life in rural areas and small villages: from the work of framing (126:5-6; 129:3, 6-7), building (127:1-2); and gate keeping (130:6), as well as the activities of hunting and warfare (120:4, 124), festival and celebration, and especially from the sphere of family and home (123:2, 127:3, 128:3-4, 131:2). Klaus Seybold concludes that the world of the Songs “is the world of...the people[:] of the farmer; the handworker; the mother with small children; the father of the family, who works from early until late, who experiences both tears [of tribulation and] jubilation, who rejoices at the festivals and thinks about religious matters. These psalms are witnesses from everyday life” (Limburg 182).

As witnesses from everyday life – whether three thousand years ago or today – the Songs of Ascents enable us to see ourselves knit into the larger fabric of the faithful community across time, to know that we are not alone in our searching; we are not alone in our crying; and we are not alone in our celebration. We do not make a solitary pilgrimage, then, but with a great cloud of witnesses, those in our own time and those in ages past, we set out, together.

I find that, as a collective, the Songs of Ascents speak well to the trying week this parish family has endured: giving voice to our hurt, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD” (Psalm 130); and giving voice to our hope, “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.” (Psalm 126). The Songs give voice to our faith, “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” (Psalm 121); and these Songs give voice to our worship, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’” (Psalm 122). We press ourselves into these strong Songs, not only as authentic individuals, but as a community, as a body, as nothing less than the Body of Christ.

For People of God, be clear: all of us cry out from the depths; in our season, all of us sow in tears; all of us lift our eyes to the One in whom we seek aid, and, in our season, all of us come home with shouts of joy. When we recognize and make ourselves present to the grief and hurt of someone else, we confront the brokenness we carry within ourselves, and, when we are faithful, we confront the reality of brokenness every one of us suffers. We share these experiences as members and as the whole: this is our pilgrimage of faith.

My wife remembers a Junior High teacher who once observed her staring at a blank page, pen jostling between fingers, ink never hitting parchment. The teacher took up Missy's fresh, sharp cornered, college-ruled paper and wadded it up. Dramatically, she rolled the paper ball between her palms, shook it like dice, and then began to un-wad the page, pressing it flat-ish on the desk. Then she told Missy to try beginning again. The page, wrinkled and creased, torn and smudged, no longer required perfection – simply that first, vulnerable participation: a single stroke...and then a letter...and then perhaps even a word.

Today – and together – we continue our journey, without either the burdens of an unnecessary propriety or an impossible perfection, but in our common faith in the God of these Songs: the One who is at once a “mighty Creator and Deliverer,” and “close at hand, who cares about the everyday concerns of his people, who blesses them,” whose people, in the depths of despair and in the throws of joy, “still hope in the Lord” (Limburg 183).

I invite you to join me in Psalm 133, found in your Book of Common Prayer on page 787.

*Oh, how good and pleasant it is, **
when brethren live together in unity!
*It is like fine oil upon the head **
that runs down upon the beard,
*Upon the beard of Aaron, **
and runs down upon the collar of his robe.
*It is like the dew of Hermon **
that falls upon the hills of Zion.
*For there the Lord has ordained the blessing: **
life for evermore.