

“I Lift Up My Eyes to the Hills”

Psalm 121

Richard C. Allen

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Whenever I read the first words of Psalm 121, I lift up my own eyes, and the hills I see are the Black Hills of western South Dakota. They are majestic. They are considered holy ground by Lakota people. Covered by pine forests and traversed by rushing streams, the Black Hills are, for me, a not-so-subtle reminder that there is a power greater than my own; that there is more to the universe than my tiny presence; that there is a God who transcends all things.

When I fly to Rapid City to attend a Sioux YMCA meeting, I leave the airport in a rental car and pull in to Bear Butte National Park. I leave the car in the lot and hike to the summit. I pause now and then to catch my breath, but also to catch a vision of the mountains, of the beauty, of the unmistakable presence of God. I literally lift up my eyes unto the hills.

It's not that God lives up on the top of a mountain. We know that God dwells as near as within our own hearts. The point is this: when the psalm writer looks to the hills, it dawns on him that God is a source of strength, a strength that is beyond his own strength. He gazes upon the hills, and he knows that he need not rely solely upon his own wisdom. There is a wisdom deeper than his own. He stares out at the hills, and he knows there is a force of love greater than his own capacity to love. He looks upon the hills and blurts out a magnificent statement of faith: **“My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.”**

I know that bookstores usually have a self-help section. They often have a pretty good selection. I could recommend a few. But for today, drawing on Psalm 121, I would encourage us to consider how help comes from God. Psalm 121 ought to be there in every self-help section of every bookstore. If God can create the heavens and the earth, God can probably partner with us to overcome our dilemmas.

As we read through the 150 psalms recorded in the Bible, we see that one of the psalmist's greatest dilemmas is how to feel connected to one's own soul. In some of the psalms, the writer feels utterly disconnected. In other psalms, the writer is so intimately connected to his own soul that he or she feels like shouting a few 'alleluias.' The Hebrew word is 'nephish.' In English, we say 'soul.' The soul is that part of us that is made by God for relating to God. It is that part of us that is eternal. It is that part of us that responds in awe to beauty and to love and to music, and allows us to feel truly alive.

When Jesus entered the wilderness to spend forty days, what we now call Lent, he was being intentional about nurturing his soul. So, for me, Lent has a lot to do with feeding the soul, bringing it to consciousness, awakening the part of me that is made by God for relating to God.

A few weeks ago, on a Friday day-off, I drove down to the shore to walk the beach. It may have been the windiest day on record! The waves crashed upon the sand. The gulls had to adjust their flight patterns to accommodate the power of the wind. I could taste the salt in the air. Mostly, I felt alive! Felt like shouting a few 'alleluias.' Rocky Neck State Park was the wilderness that day. My time there got me in touch with the part of me that is eternal. There were probably 30 other things I could have been doing back at church, but part of our essential work as human beings is to breathe a little life into our souls.

I like to hang out with people who pay attention to the care and feeding of their souls. I have a friend who has retired from practicing law. He specialized in environmental law. He says that was satisfying in many ways. But now that he is retired, he is writing poetry. He is being a psalmist. His poetry arises from within him. He says he is shocked by what comes out of his pen onto the paper. When he writes, he trembles. He describes his poetry as his soul work. He's not interested in publishing it or making money from it. It is enough for him simply to be feeding his soul. When he reads his poems to me, his countenance changes. His face lights up. His eyes tear up. His beard curls up. He is alive in a way that is eternal.

When Nicodemus sought out Jesus after dark; essentially, he was in search of his own soul. He had a college degree. He was respected as a teacher of religious traditions. He held a position of authority in the community. But he just knew something was missing. He was out of touch with his soul. Jesus talked with him about being born a second time. One way to understand Jesus' teaching is to hear Jesus inviting Nicodemus to start feeding his soul. He has excelled at feeding his mind. Now, it is time to nurture that part of him that is made by God for relating to God.

This work of feeding the soul is not limited to the 40 days of Lent. It is intended to be part of our regular diet throughout the year. The psalmist stepped out of his routine and looked upon the hills. That is where he nurtured his soul. Where do we nurture ours? That is the question!

It can be as simple as gathering wood and lighting a fire. It can be as complex as assaulting Mt. Everest. It can be as relaxing as a cup of tea. It can be as aggressive as running a marathon. It can be as creative as a splash of paint on canvas. It can be as childlike as a game of hopscotch.

It can be as silent as a prayerful walk in the woods. There is an invitation in Psalm 121 to consider how and where our souls are fed. And there is an urgency about doing this work of feeding the soul. For when we are intentional about nurturing the part of us that God made for relating to God, that's when we're living in the greatest of hope! Amen.