

Psalm 121 From Harm's Way

There is a movie from the 1960's by Otto Preminger with John Wayne and Kirk Douglas called, "In Harm's Way." The movie is set during WWII in the Pacific Theater beginning with the attack on Pearl Harbor and extending into what I assume are fictionalized operations which are really a dramatic stage to examine the impact of war on the lives of the people who fight.

The focus is not mainly the physical impact of being in the Army or Navy or the experience of combat, getting wounded, things like that, but the effect of war on relationships; parent-child relationships, marriages, and friendships.

One of the ironies of war is exposed in the efforts of the people involved to have healthy, well-adjusted lives in the middle of such chaos, such an indecent situation. How are people to be healthy in such an unhealthy world?

Even when the world is not fighting a major war like WWII (there is always a minor war somewhere in the world, though not minor to the people fighting them) the only safe conclusion is that the world is always an unhealthy place and there are many dangers and risks

that must be faced. To be alive . . . is to be in harm's way.

Psalm 121, Dangers and Risks

Last week the sermon was about guilt and condemnation which is one of the ways we are all impacted by the risks and dangers associated with life. I mentioned then that there are other sources of anxiety and that the Bible speaks of redemption in other ways than The Forgiveness of Sin.

The 121st Psalm is an example because it does not speak to the issue of guilt and very interestingly it is not really concerned with the threat of death, which his one of the other great sources of anxiety.

Instead, the psalm speaks of the harm that comes in the time we share this earthy life. While the fear of death may stand behind it, the concern expressed here refers to the pain and suffering we fear before death ends life.

We live on a sphere with nearly 8 billion other people, each with basic needs that must be daily met and the way we go about meeting those needs is not very tidy - and sometimes not just. There are no guarantees. The fear can be paralyzing.

Plains and Mountains

I have lived most of my life in the middle of the basin of the Mississippi River that Mark Twain wrote about in, “Life on the Mississippi,” that stretches from the Appalachian Mountains in the east to the Rockies in the west and is mostly characterized by rolling terrain that we very unceremoniously call, “plains.”

I have always loved the majesty and beauty of mountain vistas and there have been a few times thought I might like to live in the mountains. If I am right to believe that I am of Scottish heritage, and thus Celtic, then perhaps that draw to the hills comes from some kind of inherited biological trait associated with being a descendant of people who lived in the high country.

My oldest son is spending more and more time in Colorado and says he is seriously looking for jobs there or graduate schools. Perhaps his Celtic background is working on him.

In the end though, all that time in the center of the country where there are no oceans and not much in the way of mountains, I must say I experience a kind of security in the world’s largest cornfield.

Anyway, it was a “hill country” person who wrote this psalm - and the Judean hills are big enough to supply the inspiration for the opening line, “I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?” If it was me, I might have prayed to the God of the Plains, where a person can put both feet on the ground without the fear of falling from a great height or running into an ocean.

But the mountains make such a good metaphor for mighty strength and permanence and shelter. “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” There is no question that the “solidness” of the hills is seen here as a source of security and comfort and help.

The Lord’s Help

If it is given that we are in harm’s way, just because we are alive, and the conviction of the psalm is that the Lord will keep us from harm; God watches over our lives; it is also given that we each do suffer harm in one way or another, at one time or another, just like we all sin and experience guilt in one way or another, and sooner or later we all die. So what does it mean that the Lord watches over us and keeps us from harm’s way?

The first thing to say is that we must acknowledge and be grateful for all the ways in which we experience life's goodness. Life is not all suffering and pain, and there are many fascinating and wonderful episodes. There is birth. There is beauty. There are victories as well as defeats, reconciliations as well as estrangements, and pleasures that force us to conclude that it is better to have lived and suffered in this life than to have never lived at all. We must never lose sight of that. Every good thing that happens is God watching over us.

Beyond that, we believe that we each individually and together as a people are being prepared for eternal life, and that part of our preparation is learning to trust; and part of it is learning how to be good, to grow up to salvation.

The theological term is "Sanctification." It is like an education. Life is a school and we are learning. To say that God watches over and cares for us means that God makes sure our training is complete and our salvation secure. We are never promised that it would be painless. The hardships we face are not suffered in vain, but serve as a part of a journey towards eternity, which means that our struggles are also redeemed in *this* life because by grace they shape our character and make us courageous and kind and generous, and because they give us hope; they have a purpose.

The Mountains and Plains

And we each have been given purpose too, God's providential care means that nothing can happen to us that will keep us from that purpose. "I lift up my eyes to the hills," a sign of God's strength and permanence in a world of risk and danger. Any harm that comes to us is not beyond that which we are enabled to endure without it resulting in our good.

Our help comes from the one who put the mountains and the plains in their place, and the oceans and the solar systems and the galaxies in theirs, and you and I in ours, from the one who cares for each one of us, and for the world which is our home.

To say that God cares for us means that we can have healthier lives no matter what comes our way, good or evil, the dangers we face can do us no real harm.

There is a liberating peace that comes in the faith expressed in this psalm, may that peace accompany you and each of us throughout life's wonderful journey.

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