

Psalm 121
March 5, 2023

Ascents

There have been a couple of interesting religious trends that we rarely discuss, one very old and the other very new. They are represented to us by words that sound the same but are spelled differently. On the one hand, a nun is a female monk, who has taken a vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience. On the other hand, a none is a person who says they have no religious affiliation. The one is very religious, the other not at all.

Both are separated from the believing community; one by being a part of an order that, choosing solitude, has left the ordinary world where the church situates itself, and the other by being immersed in the ordinary world without any connection to the church.

They both, along with the rest of us, are confronted with religious realities, and are forced to answer religious questions such as; What is life's meaning? What is Truth? What is the source of joy, love, and hope? Questions like that. We are meant to ask them even if we do joke about it.

For those of us who are intentional about being a part of the family of faith, in addition to the other groups of which we are a part; family, residential, vocational, recreational, and political; and though we are aware that though human beings need each other's help and thus need fellowship in all these different ways, there is another kind of needed help.

There are some life-issues that even the various groups with which we associate can't help. It is interesting that there has emerged a group of people; nuns, who have chosen a more solitary kind of life; and another group of people, nones, who have left the church behind altogether.

The questions remain. Let me speak for a moment about the direction of our asking.

One of the Bible's visual aides to ask religious questions is directional. We ask the questions up. We build buildings that have steeples and towers that point to the skies. We purchase land up in the mountains so that we can attend retreats and contemplate the questions and refer to the experiences we have there as "mountaintop" experiences.

Sometimes we even pray looking up (although not always). Some lift up their hands. We do not ask these questions of each other, but of the heavens, of the maker of the heavens.

The 121st psalm is called a song of ascents because it also points up, and that direction can be quite literal. "I lift mine eyes into the hills." The "hills," could be the hills of Jerusalem; the Mount of Olives, Mount Moriah, and Mount Zion, on which sat the Temple where the sacrifices were offered; a place where people went to give back a part of their lives, and to offer praise and thanksgiving to the creator of all things and the source of life. It is a place where people went together to ask

life's most important questions, the one's all the groups we are in and all the preachers can't answer.

Or someone has taken a retreat up into the mountains because the mountains are like the oceans, big and mighty and strong, as well as a bit mysterious and even dangerous. But they take us to the heights

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills." or perhaps to the empty space in the high vaulted church, or to the skies themselves to which all the steeples point; and ask our questions. We are asked by our text to put forth one of these questions.

"From whence cometh my help? Or, "Where does my help come from?"

And the answer comes back from the hills, or the altar, or the stained glass through which from time-to-time the sun itself shines its light on the altar. And with our attention directed up, we hear the answer;

2 My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

3 He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.

4 Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.

6 The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

Our questioning begins when we realize our need for help. If we see that need only in small terms, we may never be aware of our need for help beyond what our neighbors and friendly professionals can provide. If one needs legal or medical or technical help, it can be found . . . Google it, someone in the area knows.

But if I need meaning in life or absolution from guilt or liberation from anxiety or whatever it is we mean when we say, "the healing of the soul," then the people in the community, even the minister, can only help to a certain extent, and one is confronted with the need for the divine, because all they can do is join us in our asking.

The nuns left the world of ordinary life and its distractions to ask the questions and hopefully find answers, and the modern nones have left the church, believing it could not help, that with the ones they live and work and play, the schools and businesses and workout gyms where they gather, they might find the answers there.

But hear the ancient voice; and do not disparage it because it is ancient and did not have the modern understanding of space or time, or technological experience of everyday life that we know, such as watching TV or surfing the web; as if it were unable to contemplate life's meaning because it spoke its message before the industrial revolution began. When it says, "My help cometh from the Lord," listen, because it is as wise about things as any has every been.

Among other things, it tells us that the rule of love is the highest rule; that God is beneficent and kind, gracious and merciful, and that we are best when we aspire to follow that example. It tells us that the accumulation of wealth and power and knowledge can never ultimately satisfy and that the kind of control over our lives and of the world we often seek is impossible.

It tells us that even though the consequences of our sinfulness plays out in the world and affects every aspect of our lives, and that within a few decades everyone will die, that there is no reason for despair but hope because both now and in the hereafter the Lord helps us on our way, watches over us, and keeps us from ultimate harm.

These are human questions and the nuns and the nones cannot escape them, and the word from the text is that God has tended to them, and we can trust . . .

7 The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: shall preserve thy soul.

8 The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

We came into the sanctuary of the sacred, this morning, searching for the one thing needful, asking some version of the great questions. We will go out into the world of many things. Let us also go up . . .

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