

Christ the King/Year C
November 24, 2019
Psalm 121; Luke 23:23-33
“Lift Your Eyes”

Psalm 121 The Message (MSG)--A Pilgrim Song

I [lift up my eyes] to the mountains;
does my strength come from mountains?
No, my strength comes from God,
who made heaven, and earth, and mountains.

[God] won't let you stumble,
your Guardian God won't fall asleep.
Not on your life! Israel's
Guardian will never doze or sleep.

God's your Guardian,
right at your side to protect you—
Shielding you from sunstroke,
sheltering you from moonstroke.

God guards you from every evil,
he guards your very life.
He guards you when you leave and when you return,
he guards you now, he guards you always.

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by,

watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The Word of the Lord. *People: Thanks be to God.*

Today is the final Sunday in the liturgical year because next week, we begin the season of Advent and begin our preparations for Jesus' birth. This is a moment in the life of church and faith where we look back—maybe with nostalgia at the year, or regret, or guilt, or gratitude. What does it feel like for you as you look back? I recall some mountain top moments from my life, and a few in particular that are very dear to me. What is a mountain top moment from your own life? Where is God in that moment?

For many summers, our family retreats to the hills of Black Mountain, N.C. near Asheville to enjoy the hills of Montreat (the Southeastern regional conference center of the PCUSA), and we often hike Lookout Mountain at least once together. I love the physical challenge of ascending that mountain, and I especially enjoy sitting up there to catch our breath with Sarah and the children. With each year's hike, I am keenly aware of both

my age and of how much the children have grown; they whiz by me with ease as I take each step more carefully and slowly than I used to! Lookout helps me to lift my eyes into a sacred realm which helps me to look at the rest of my life differently. From the top you can view the lush green beauty of the mountain valley called the Seven Sisters. You can see some of the huge houses of Montreat and the conference center buildings and Lake Susan, and from the peak, those large structure are just tiny specks. I like to think that some of our big problems are tiny specks for God's grace to deal with. From the mountain top I remember that God is much bigger than we are, and that the whole creation is an amazing creation of God.

What do you see from your mountain top moments? Where is God at work?

In early August, I got to check off an item from my bucket list: to visit the Isle of Iona, Scotland. Iona is a lovely little place off the West Coast of Scotland's mainland. You have to take trains or buses to Oban, then catch a ferry over to Mull, then take a bus all the way to the other side of Mull, then catch another ferry to Iona. Iona is a fraction of the size of our island, and just after my visit to it cool, misty August morning, I was on the bus headed back towards the other side of Mull and kept seeing one gorgeous mountain after another and then another, and kept lifting my eyes heavenward, and then God brought many things into clearer focus for me.

I felt inspired to write on my iPad these words, as if from God: "We become so full of ourselves. We idolize our achievements, the things we can buy and sell, our relationships, so many things, and they can make us full of our selves, so much so that we forget what it means to become full of God."

Iona, for me, was a place to get full of God again, to be reminded what life can be when we are full of God rather than full of ourselves. On the day I arrived, it was late in the day, and it was in the mid 50s, cool and a bit rainy. Good Scottish weather. I got off the ferry and ascended the little hill

to the Columba hotel. After a bit of settling in and food, then I walked up the path just a few hundred yards past small homes and farmland to the Abbey where at 9 PM each evening there is evening prayer with people from all over the world, fellow pilgrims there all trying to unload their idols to get good and full of God. The setting makes it easier in a large stone sanctuary where the notes of music carry throughout the space whether sung or played on a piano for a long time. We prayed and sang and sat in silence with Scripture. It was so simple, yet so profound, so holy, so life giving, and oh so good.

Just outside the Abbey is a small hill that Columba would ascend to write and pray; it is where many pages of the *Book of Kells* was created, and just beneath the hill outside the sanctuary is the small chapel where Columba's relics remained for centuries. It was and is a site for pilgrims to come and pray.

I will confess that I am not a very mystical person of faith, but there was something holy and stirring at these sites, all surrounded by some of the oldest stone Celtic crosses in the world. Columba said that Iona, right where I was standing, was one of the thin places where earth and heaven meet.

These mountain top moments, the holy, thin places where heaven and earth mesh together, they reframe our worries, fears, and problems, and they have a way of helping us deal with our selves so that we can see God with fresh eyes.

Think of all the times people ascend mountains in Scripture. Moses ascending Sinai to talk to God. His face shined. God changed him. Jesus going to mountain to pray (deserted places). On the mountain he spends time in communion with God. The transfiguration is a mountain-top moment where Jesus reveals who he is to his key disciples, and they are so moved as he helps raise their understanding of who they are and who he is, Peter wants to stay there on the mountain and pitch tents.

Today's readings from Scripture are two very different scenes of mountains. The first is from Psalm 121 where the psalmist, maybe king David, feasts his eyes upon the mountains and hills and remembers where his help in life comes from. It comes from God and God alone.

I remember a great man of faith each time I think of Psalm 121, Tommy Hollace. He was a man of small stature, but he had a big personality, like that of a drum major, cheerful, bright, and so funny. He was in his upper 80s more than a decade ago, and he and his wife endured a terrible tragedy, their daughter was murdered by her ex-husband. She happened to be the mother of a college friend of mine named Paige with whom I sang in choir.

I conducted the memorial service for her, and we had a brief family service for the internment of the ashes, and before the service, I remember speaking with Tommy, and he looked at me with his deep blue eyes, eyes of hurt, of love, of hope, and he said, "Wain, I lift mine eyes to the hills, from where does my help come. My help comes from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth."

I hope that is something you and I know even in our darkest moments—that God is the source of our strength and help.

The second mountain from our lessons today comes from the place of the skull, a mountain or hill called Golgatha where Jesus and two thieves are crucified. This mountain is a dark place, and yet Jesus reveals to us a way to focus on God even in our darkest moments. Who but Jesus could say about the ones who crucify him, "Forgive them Father for they know now what they are doing"? Who but Jesus could withhold his pain and wrath and not lash out to those who treat him so terribly? Who but Jesus could hear the longing of a thief, simply to be remembered? Jesus promises him a place in glory.

Both Bible stories today speak of God's commitment to us. Through all the things we face, in life, the peaks and the valleys, God is always with us and meets us in both places. I remember the old story Soren Kierkegaard would tell about God's commitment to us. Our understanding of God's commitment to us for him was at the core of the Christian faith. Even in our darkest moments, we can lift our eyes to God and find a friend. He tells of a man trapped by a raging fire on the edge of a cliff. In only moments, if the man doesn't act, the fire will consume him. Then the man hears a voice from beyond the cliff, from the deep dark that says, "Jump! Jump!"

"But, I can't see you! It's so dark out there!"

"Don't worry. Jump anyway because I can see you!"

We lift our eyes to the hills, and as we do we remember that our help comes from God, the Maker of heaven and earth. Lifting our eyes helps us to see our mountains with fresh eyes, and therefore we see ourselves and our God with fresh eyes. God is our keeper, our guarding, always watching over us—protecting, helping, encouraging.

We can hold on, believe, have faith, not because we are strong but because God is. Sometimes it is not what we are doing or holding on to at all, but who God is, for the one who holds us is the maker of the mountains, calling us to look up to God's beauty, away from one self and worries, to see what is amazing, life giving, and vast.

I love the story Rev. Tony Campolo loves to tell about a particular census taker who went to the home of a rather poor family in the mountains of West Virginia to gather information. He asked the mother how many dependents she had.

She began, "Well, there is Rosie, and Billy, and Lewella, Susie, Harry, and Jeffrey. There's Johnny, and Harvey, and our dog, Willie." It was then that

the census taker interrupted her and said: "No, ma'am, that's not necessary. I only need the humans."

"Ah," she said. "Well, there is Rosie, and Billy, and Lewella, Susie, Harry, and Jeffrey, Johnny, and Harvey, and...."

But there once again, the census taker interrupted her. Slightly exasperated, he said, "No, ma'am, you don't seem to understand. I don't need their names, I just need the numbers."

To which the old woman replied, "But I don't know them by numbers. I only know them by name."

Psalm 121 repeats, "God guards you. God guards you. God guards you." Jesus tells the thief who asks to be remembered, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." God loves us, is always with us, and knows us all by name.

To God be the glory. Amen.