

What's in Your Backpack?

Psalm 121

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington September 10, 2006

*Spirit renewing the earth, renewing the hearts of all people,
Blow in our weary souls, Blow through our silent lips,
Come now awake us, Spirit of God. Amen.*

Juneau International Airport. 7:30 p.m. Labor Day. Security check point.
“Alright, everyone take off your outer garments, empty your pockets. Take off your shoes and put them in the bin. Put your backpacks over here on the table.”

(The preacher puts his backpack on the table, takes off his robe, empties his pocket, takes off his shoes. Someone in the congregation cries out, “What about your belt?” He takes that off too and puts it in the bin.)

That's just what it feels like, doesn't it? Kind of foolish and half-dressed!

But before we put everything back on, let's pause on this side of the security check.

What do you carry around in your pockets? I'm serious. Look in your pocket, or in your purse what do you carry around with you? Take out something.

What did you find? *(People name various objects.)*

I always carry a comb. This is a joke. I do not carry a comb. I have not carried a comb for years.

I do carry a white handkerchief. My father told me for thirty years, “All well-dressed men carry white handkerchiefs.” And for thirty years I ignored him. But now I do carry one all the time and find it very helpful.

How many of you have ever heard the psalm that was read today?

It is a psalm that many of us know. Someone said to me before worship today, that this psalm says exactly what they believe, that God is with them and will never leave them. Psalm 121 is a psalm for travelers. “I lift up my eyes unto the hills.” It is a psalm that may have been sung as people went up to the temple in Jerusalem. It is a very steep road through the desert and a very dangerous road as well. It was along this road from Jericho to Jerusalem that the story of the Good Samaritan took place. It is a road full of robbers and thieves. It is a psalm that Jesus might have sung with his parents when he was 10 and walking up this very road.

As I have been reading this psalm, it has struck me that this psalm reminds travelers what you need to take with you when you are on a journey. It is a psalm for all of us. And whether you are off to Laurelhurst Elementary, Nathan Hale High School, the University of Washington or Microsoft tomorrow, it is a psalm that reminds us what is most important for us to carry.

Open up the Bible in the pew rack in front of you and turn to Psalm 121. You can find the psalms right there in the middle of your Bible.

Take whatever you found in your pocket or purse and hold it in one hand. And with the other hand hold the Bible and let's look at those first two verses together. For everything is contained right there in those first two verses. The rest of the psalm is a comment on what we hear there:

*“I left up my eyes to the hills.
From where will my strength come?
My strength comes from God who made heaven and earth.”*

The psalm for travelers begins, “I lift up my eyes unto the hills”. To be a good traveler you have to look to see what is around you. You have to notice. Someone once said that to be awake is to be alive. You have to be awake, you have to pay attention to be a good traveler.

My Dad likes to read those adventure-disaster books and when I was in Alaska on vacation last week with he and my mom, my Dad was reading one of those disaster books about how people got in these horrible situations outdoors. One of the stories that I remember was about this group of people who were going to go rafting down a river. They got to the river's edge and were so focused on completing their mission, getting down the river, that they never stopped and noticed that the river was in the midst of a flash flood! Can you believe it? I can believe it! They were focused on the wrong thing. And because of that, they all ended up scattered all over the river.

Sometimes we get so focused on meeting our goals, being productive, being competent that we miss what is right in front of our eyes – what is really important. We miss life.

We are all so plugged in – we have our cell phones, our laptops, our blueberries (*someone in the congregation cries out “Blackberries!”*)...our blackberries (you can tell I don't have one), our I-pods, and gameboys. We are so well connected that sometimes we don't see what is right in front of us. We have to get unplugged sometimes so we can get plugged back into life.

Technology can serve many good purposes, but sometimes it blinds us to what is really important. It can keep us in our own little worlds, missing what is in front of our eyes.

My parents and I took a vacation on the Alaska ferry last week – up the Inside Passage from Bellingham to Skagway. The ferry trip was like one long practice session in paying

attention. The captain of the boat would announce on the loudspeaker that there was a whale on the left side of the boat. We would all rush over to that side of the boat and the ferry would lean and we all would wait and watch. We learned that to pay attention you have to be quiet. And patient. Sometimes, very patient. And then, someone would cry out, "Look a spout!" And we'd all turn and look and then right before us this whale comes leaping out of the water! Wow! It was amazing!

I heard that we were out of cell-phone range on most of our voyage, which was quite distressing to some people. It meant that we couldn't walk around with our hands up to our ears all the time and had to turn and notice that there were these people next to us. We had to turn and talk to them. We got to know each other. We formed a little community on those days together on the ferry. How often does your being connected to all those gadgets at your fingertips and at your ear keep you from noticing the person who is next to you? How often do you not even know the name of the person sitting next to you – even next to you in the pew. Why don't we practice that right now. Turn and introduce yourself to the person next to you...

Doesn't that feel good?

Last night when I was at a wedding reception and I hardly knew anybody. I felt like I did in fourth grade when I went into the lunch room holding my lunch tray. Who do I know here? Where do I sit? Who won't get up and move when I sit down? There I was standing there with my drink in hand all by myself probably looking kind of awkward and feeling like everyone else around me was connected with someone.

Then I saw these two elementary kids who gave me big smiles, poked their parents and pointed at me. They must have recognized me as the minister at the wedding. I took this as an invitation and walked over met these two great kids – a 4th grader and a 5th grader and their parents. It was just the best. It felt like such a gift to have them reach out to me. And I spent the rest of the night talking with them.

You know, that is exactly what Jesus was all about. He was the great noticer. He noticed who was next to him, reached out and offered friendship, healing, hope, love. He changed people's lives, just because he noticed. As good travelers, we first need to notice.

Let's look at that second part of the first verse, "From where will my help come?" Or as I learned it from the King James version, "From whence cometh my help?" The second thing that travelers need, is room to wonder. We have to have empty spaces in our backpacks and pockets. We have to have time to put things down, for rest, for Sabbath. Time to get a good night's sleep. Time to dream. Time to be.

A lot of us are carrying around way too much. Stuffing our pockets and backpacks with so much that we don't need. Every Thursday night I see a 14 year old who tosses his backpack to me. It is so heavy – so many books, so much stuff!

Listen to what Jesus told his disciples about what they need to carry. You can find it in Matthew 10, verses 9 to 10.

“Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff...”

In other words, you don't need a lot of equipment. Make room for wonder. Travel light. Go looking for love, and you will find love.

And finally, let's look at verse two.

“My strength comes from God who made heaven and earth.”

Good travelers need to notice, wonder and finally, remember. They need to remember who they are and whose they are.

When I was in the 4th grade what helped me make it to school were what my family called “pink pills” - pink wintergreen mints. Oh they gave me strength! They gave me courage enough to walk to the bus stop, to face the bully at school, to walk into the lunchroom one more day. I realize now that I think why they gave me courage was because my grandmother always gave them to me when I saw her. They reminded me of her- of her love for me, her care for me, her strength.

That is what we all need. We need each other to remind us, to help us remember what is true. God is with us. Nothing can take us from God, no matter where we go. No one can prove to you that it is true. We need each other to remind us of that, show us that. That's why we need mentors and grandparents, friends and parents, aunts and uncles to remind us that we are not alone, that we are love. That we belong to each other. We belong to God.

Psalm 121 is a psalm for travelers – a good psalm to memorize, to carry around in your mind and heart as you travel. A reminder of what are the most important things we need to carry with us.

Five years ago tomorrow was a terribly sad day. Our church was full that following Sunday with many of you and with many strangers. Many people who had come to find what they had lost, something of the ground under their feet.

They came to be reminded of this incredibly precious gift that has been given to us as the church. We are holders of the wisdom of what it means to be good travelers:

We need to stop and notice.

We need to wonder.

We need to remember.

It is what we practice every time we meet.

It is the most important work we do as church.

Our country and our world have been changed in many and tragic ways by what 19 terrorists did five years ago. We put some terrible things in our pockets that day – vengeance and violence and fear. We used that day to justify abuses of human rights and torture in Guantanamo, Bagram, Iraq and Abu Ghraib. We got some awful things in our pockets that we need to clean out.

What are you carrying in your backpack, your pockets that you need to let go of today so you can make room for what really matters?

I am not going to let 19 terrorists change my world and neither should you. Instead we are called to have our lives changed and changed again and again by the one who walked among us 2000 years ago and called us to a life he called “the Way”.

A life out on the road.
To lives of risk, and daring.

We step out of this place into a world torn by violence and fear, to places in our own lives that can feel wonderful or scary or lonely.

Wherever our paths are calling us to go – to school, to work, to home, to a cross - let us carry this psalm and its wisdom with us.

Stop and notice.

Wonder.

Remember.

God is alive.

God is here.

Nothing can take that away.

Let us go forth followers of the Way, God’s blessing with us all.

Amen