

“Kept By God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent I – March 5, 2017

Psalm 121

In our worship planning here at John Knox, we work on a two-month cycle. In other words, two months ago, I would have chosen the scripture for this morning and shared it with our worship planning team. That way, when we met the following month we could plan in more detail our worship themes, songs, etc., for today.

Never would I have imagined how choosing Psalm 121 two months ago would speak to me so deeply today.

I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? (121:1)

When we got the phone call last Friday night that Debbie’s father, Steve Main, had died, we were most definitely in shock. Our family was literally scattered across the country: Debbie’s parents were in Hawaii, her brother was in Arizona, Debbie was in Ohio, and the rest of us were here in Indiana. It’s safe to say we all were asking, “From where will our help come?”

I have shared with others this week that after years of talking the talk of grief, now I have to walk the walk. And I specifically remember wondering if I would have the strength to do this. Which is why this psalm spoke to me so eloquently at this particular time. I don’t have to have the strength – that strength is provided by God.

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep (121:2-4).

For those times when we experience great loss or stress in our lives, it is reassuring to know that our God will never fall asleep. For those times when we feel we are spinning amid all that life throws at us, it is comforting to know that our God will not let go of us, will never abandon us. For all those times and more, we don’t have to rely on ourselves for help; our help comes from the Lord, who is the creator of all that we see around us.

In just eight verses, the psalmist uses a form of the Hebrew word “shamar” – which means “to keep.” Some translations of the Bible will translate this word as “to guard” (New Jerusalem Bible) or “to watch over” (New International Version). But I appreciate the New Revised Standard Version’s “to keep,” because I believe it speaks to God’s presence with us on all of our different journeys, but especially on the journeys that are difficult and hard.

Think of it like this. We own stuff or items – we have cars, we have pieces of clothing, etc. But if we have a pet, we keep it. We take

care of our dogs or cats or whatever we have – we feed them, groom them, care for them, take them to the vet, etc. I will admit that some pet owners are actually probably “owned” by their pets – but I think you get the idea: we keep them because we want to protect them from any harm, for harm to them means pain to us.

God does not “have” us, does not “own” us like we own or have items in our closet or garage. God keeps us. God cares for us. God will not let our feet be moved. God will not let us slumber or sleep. God will keep us from all evil. God will keep our life.

Robert Fisher writes: *What a shock this must be to us who think we are keeping our own lives! We balance our own checkbooks; we stay on top of our own medical appointments; we do our own shopping; and we generally take personal responsibility for our own well-being. The idea that we have a keeper who watches over us and protects us may be tough to understand, let alone to accept.*

Having a keeper is a two-way street. For all that we gain, we must first give ourselves to the one who offers the protection. We gain protection, but we lose a sense of total independence. In other words, the singular theme of Psalm 121 may not sound like great news to everybody. It may sound like an enormous encroachment on our lives.

It is as hard to accept that the Lord is my keeper as it is to accept that the Lord loves me, but these two facts are intertwined. That is the key to understanding not merely what the Lord does for us, but why. God's love is the very foundation of God's trustworthiness. God loves us, and therefore God keeps us (Bobby Fisher, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, ©2010: 58-60*).

God loves us, and therefore God keeps us.

As our family has walked through this week of grief, there is no question that we have felt kept by God. God was Debbie's mother's shade at her right hand, through the emergency personnel and strangers in Hawaii, who comforted and reassured her that nothing she might have done would have changed the eventual outcome. God kept us as Debbie's brother was already half-way to Hawaii when he got the call, and was able to be with her mom much faster than if he or Debbie had already been here at home. God kept our going out and our coming in by returning Jo Ann and Jeff home safely on Thursday, and in that physical reunion we already felt God's healing presence as a family.

Many times, I believe it's easy to allow faith to be equal to the rest of life's attributes. In other words, we place God on the same shelf as finances, health, security, and pleasure. We lose sight of how we are kept by God, and instead start believing we are keeping our lives just fine by ourselves. It's not hard to do – not hard at all.

But one of the core principles of the Christian faith is trusting and believing that we are only and solely here because of the grace of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Not because of our own achievements or

hard work. Not because of luck or good family upbringing. Not because of class or race or social status. Our lives exist because God loves us, and therefore God keeps us.

What would it look like for us to truly live in the light of that statement of faith? What would it look like for us to not only profess “the Lord is my keeper,” but to understand why God is my keeper – because God loves me for no other reason than I am created in God’s image? What would it look like for us to live so that those we come in touch with know that the Lord keeps our lives?

It would look like a couple who are struggling in their marriage refusing to give up on one another, being honest in their challenges, and seeking growth and wholeness through the support of others, rather than retreating from one another in isolation.

It would look like a church acknowledging its own weaknesses, knowing where its ghosts reside, but not being afraid to step out in faith. It would look like disciples being faithful risk-takers, trusting that God will be with them when they stumble or even fail, but nevertheless act on their belief that what they are doing comes from a deep sense of call to serve.

It would look like a belief that it’s not how much we accumulate to be secure, but how much we give back in gratitude that ensures security for more than just ourselves. It would look like selfless hospitality, showing a stranger the same attention and care we would show our most beloved friend or family member. It would look like shedding our long-held grudges and preconceptions, and replacing them with reconciliation and a fresh vision of our relationships in faith.

God loves us, and therefore God keeps us.

The youth went on their summer mission trip to West Virginia last year, to work with West Virginia Ministry of Advocacy and Workcamps. When we got our t-shirts at the end of the week, they had changed their logo from past years. Their new logo read: “I am LOVED, and therefore I serve.” I have had numerous strangers come up to me when I am wearing this t-shirt and say how much that strikes them.

Because, at its heart, it reflects an acknowledgement and belief that before anything we do or say or achieve, we are loved by someone else – we are loved by God. And because of that self-realization, our identity is no longer centered in our ability to keep our own lives. Our identity is forged in the knowledge that God loves us, and through that love we are kept by God. As a result, we serve as disciples because God first loved us.

Steve Main lived his life knowing he was kept by God, and I will forever be grateful for God’s grace that touched me through him.

The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore (121:8).

Alleluia! Amen.