

From Where Will My Help Come?

Psalm 121

November 27, 2022

Read Psalm 121

This is the Word of the LORD.

Hope.

Hope is the theme of the first Sunday in Advent. We have entered a time popular culture has labeled Christmas-time; the airwaves and internet are overwhelmed with opportunities, analysis, and anxiety over the true meaning of cultural Christmas: consumerism. It is a celebration of *our* wealth, *our* abundance, and *our* materialism. How did Black Friday go for retailers? What happens if the railroads go on strike next week? What is the big, hot item this year? What is the gift you are going to give your significant relationships this year? Will you spend enough to show them how much you care? It is enough to take the good out of the season – which, if consumerism and cultural expectations are the foundation, would not necessarily be a bad thing.

Even in the church, there is a tendency to want to rush through these weeks to get to Christmas Eve. There are a lot of good things happening, but I see and experience the pressure to be fully prepared for all the different things going on. As I look around this congregation, I am aware that some of you are overwhelmed with the obligations of these next few weeks. Whether it is social engagements; getting things ordered, wrapped, and sent on time; the programs we are planning and presenting; or simply experiencing the anxiety, shortness, and stress of everyone else; there is enough pressure to take the good out of the season – which, if it is all about us and what we are doing, would not necessarily be a bad thing.

In some ways we need the misguided “good” things to go away to clear the field for what this season is really about. Jesus is the reason for the season – isn’t that what the bumper sticker says? – but what about Jesus makes him the reason for the season?

Advent is a time in which we **remember** the incarnation – the Word became flesh. We think of Emmanuel, God with us, in the birth of the Messiah. We bear witness to the reality that Jesus was born of Mary. We are not arguing about a hypothetical concept, we are stating an historical fact that has great meaning.

Advent also is a time to **remember God’s promise and anticipate Jesus’ return**. We express our confident hope in the great words of prophecy. We live in the expectation of Jesus’ triumphant return; we are just like those who lived in the darkness before Jesus’ birth were waiting for the Messiah. Together, in our worship, in our preparations, in our conversations with others, we have the opportunity to share our conviction that the God who has been faithful will continue to be faithful. We place our trust in Him.

Thus, Advent and Christmas are more than tradition. They are our testimony remembering how God is faithful to His promises. Advent is about remembering. That is the easy part. The hard part is that Advent also is about living in waiting. Advent is a time of waiting. It is a time of waiting in hope.

Hope involves “waiting.” Hebrews 11 says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not* seen.” Paul wrote to the Romans, “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:24-25) In other words, *hope* necessarily means *existing in anticipation, or waiting*.

As I reflected on the notion of “waiting,” it occurred to me that there are different kinds of waiting. There is waiting for a specific time. “I can’t wait,” is something children say, meaning they are excited about a trip, a party, or some other time-certain event. They look forward to Christmas morning with an eagerness for the unwrapping of presents; “I can’t wait!” They wait for their turn. There is waiting with expectation, like a pregnant woman waiting for the birth of her child. She may or may not know the specific time or date of delivery – but at the minimum, she has a reasonable estimate.

And there is waiting without a clear time-frame, which is something many people experience. This is when someone cries out to God for hope, for a word, for something or some reason to continue on. Here, the silence and the waiting are excruciating. Perhaps the cry is for a release from the pain of loss, the pain of loneliness, or the physical pain of illness or injury. There is waiting for release. Those suffering from pain or illness, those suffering from loneliness or brokenness, those who are imprisoned either in their own bodies or in their own situations or in their own circumstances all wait for the day they are released.

Waiting in hope is one of the reasons we look to the Psalms. Psalm 121 is the second of what are known as the Psalms of Ascent. They were sung in a time of waiting for God’s promises to be fulfilled; particularly important through times when Israel was under the thumb of an oppressive empire and no longer the power in the region. These were Psalms sung in expectant hope of God’s promises yet to be fulfilled.

This was a psalm written by an individual whose faith had been renewed or refreshed at a festival. These were words of encouragement to himself: reminding himself of God’s faithfulness and exhorting himself to trust in God.

The Psalmist reflects the hope – the waiting in anticipation of God’s protection – when he writes in the opening lines, “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” The rest of the Psalm is a description of the overarching protection the LORD provides. It is a psalm that remembers God’s faithfulness. It was a psalm that would remind the believer of God’s presence in times of distress and trouble. That is an expression of hope – of waiting in anticipation of God’s action.

The first pastor with whom I served was Jim Rauch in Escondido, California. His daughter, Jesse, is the same age as our eldest, Kaley. Jesse and her husband, Tyler, had a daughter, Nora, who at age 3 months was diagnosed with a rare seizure disorder, developmental delays and other complex medical concerns. Nora experienced daily or twice daily seizures, multiple medications and their side effects, fragile lungs, and an immune system that left her more vulnerable to what would otherwise be mild illnesses. Most of these health issues classify Nora under a rare disease called Aicardi syndrome.

Jesse bravely shared her journey and prayers online through a site she calls “She Lived Happily Ever After.” Early on, she wrote this:

In September 2014 I posted a piece asking the world to pray for a Christmas miracle for a 6-month-old baby.... Nora... my daughter. You will never know the desperation, the anguish, with which I prayed. I sought prayers for relief from relentless seizures—prayers for healing. The anticipation of Christmas 2014 was a beacon of hope amidst despair-- a cry to heaven begging God to remember me-- to remember us. [note: That, friends, is the essence of Advent. It is, in a nutshell, a description of hope.] In September 2014 I shared these words,

"this is what binds my heart and soul to Christmas- the promise of good news- the promise of God in the flesh. Immanuel, God with us. Amidst the confusion and suffering in this season of our lives, my heart is holding on to that beautiful miracle. The promise and assurance that Jesus is with us, that he is ever present."

He was. He is. He will be.¹

What I want you to see is that hope is not always euphoric. Waiting can be anguish. No one likes waiting. It is a reminder that God acts in God's time, not ours. It is a reminder that faith is the "assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things *not seen*."

Waiting for Jesus

Advent is a time to renew our focus as we wait; to remember we wait *with* expectation. Psalm 121 is like the pep talk we give ourselves to renew our hope-filled expectation. We do not know when, but we live in the anticipation of Christ's triumphant return. The victory won at Calvary will be fully realized in the coming kingdom of our Lord.

Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, after 2000 years convictions can get a little shaky. Yes, yes, the Hebrews waited 400 years in slavery in Egypt before God sent Moses. They were waiting for *generations* for release. Yes, yes, there was almost 500 years between the last prophets and the time Jesus was born. They were waiting for *generations* for rescue and the promise of a savior; and when he came, he did not look anything like what they anticipated or expected. So, yes, waiting is described in the Bible. But that was them and this is us – why do *we* have to wait and what are we supposed to do while we are waiting? How do we know God will step up and really do what Scripture promises in the rest of the story?

Welcome to Advent.

Why does it take so long for God to act? Have you ever wondered? I have. Waiting just does that to you – it is open time in which all sorts of ideas can get played out if you do not have an anchor onto which to hold. Eventually, God did respond to the people's cries in Egypt. Eventually, God did provide a savior. Eventually, Christ will return.

Let me stop there for a moment and ask you: do we really believe that last one? Do we really believe that Christ will return?

¹ <https://shelivedhappilyeverafter.com/2017/11/28/its-after-thanksgiving-so-i-can-admit-this/>

Humans have a remarkable tendency to forget God in good times and in hard times. In good times when people are comfortable in their own material wealth, they are inclined to feel self-deserving and tend to take God for granted. The longer it has been since they were in desperate need and acutely praying to God, “Lord, help me,” the more God is forgotten, takes a back seat, or simply is considered a tradition that was important “back then.”

A similar phenomenon takes place in times of trial. When things have been difficult for a while, we dismiss God as uncaring or distant. We become pragmatists – looking for the god who will work for us and make things better for us – because we stop expecting the one true God of the Bible to show up. We stop looking. Although we may pay our respects to God in church during worship, the hope that God would actually *do* something has long since evaporated. Yes, we believe – in theory, and in practice by our tradition – but when push comes to shove, we do not have confidence to know if God will show up.

The Psalmist reminds us, “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where *will* my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” Through the hard times, through the circumstances that would seem to suggest otherwise, we hold onto the hope that our help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

What Do We Think Happens When God Shows Up?

I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about “hope” as it relates to what happens next; what we expect to happen *after* God shows up.

Follow me here for a moment: Jen and I have had dogs for our entire married life. For years, when I pulled into the garage at our home, as soon as I opened the car door I could hear our dogs barking. At one point we had five dogs: a large retriever/hound mix named Calvin, three Pekinese, and one Maltese. It was quite a little pack.

Anyway, when they heard the garage door open, they knew someone had arrived. Their excitement level went through the roof. They could not contain their enthusiasm. Because family came through the garage door and they knew the familiar sounds of each of our cars – their anticipation caused their entire bodies to shake as if they were being electrified and they barked with joy.

It almost did not matter if I had been away for days, hours, or minutes; their reaction was the same. It was an awesome welcome. It felt like I was their hero arriving home for a victory parade. Their joy at my coming was a long, loving, warm hug. I want you to hold onto that picture for a moment.

I would like to tell you that I responded to them with the same level of enthusiasm they showed for me. But the truth was different. At the end of a day, I often did not feel like a hero. I often did not feel victorious. I often did not have the energy to match or in any way receive their excitement. I came home and felt like I was a disappointment to them because I was not immediately engaged, immediately ready to play, or immediately receptive of their whole measure of joy.

And here is where I project myself into God’s shoes and begin to wonder. Specifically, what does God *really* think of me? Yes, I know that we remember Jesus’ incarnation was “God with us”; but where and how do I fit in with that? Yes, I can be excited; and, yes, I can anticipate with joy Jesus’ return; but when Jesus thinks about *me*, is it with that same sigh and eye roll I sometimes gave thinking about having to

deal with the dogs when I walked through the door? I mean, sometimes it feels like God's grace extends broadly enough to include me generally, but does God even think about me specifically?

Does anyone else ever experience this? Are there times when you wonder if God values you – and if so, to what extent? Are you really important or are you the plastic toy in the Happy Meal?

For example, I would love to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant," but I often look around and see a lack of spectacular results. I don't see a fifty or hundred-fold increase. Does that mean I am being faithful in a way that is pleasing to God or have I missed the boat and been a tremendous disappointment? I would be delighted to know that I have loved others as God has commanded; yet, I know that dealing with people often wears me out. Does that mean I am unloving or that there is something wrong with me? Does God look at me, sigh, and think to himself, "What wasted potential. What missed opportunities." Does he dread coming in from the garage to find me all excited? I mean, is there anything about me that God values or appreciates – because sometimes it can be really lonely and scary to think otherwise.

The Psalmist reminds us, "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where *will* my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth." Through the hard times, through the circumstances that would seem to suggest otherwise, my hope is that God is who he says he is and that God loves me as much as Scripture tells me he does. How much does Scripture say that God really loves *me*?

To answer, I lift my eyes and look at this table: the table where we celebrate the Lord's supper. Do we have ears to hear how deeply God loves us? Do we remember how fully and mysteriously he knows our frame and cares for us? Do we have eyes to see how God answers prayers?

Let me return to Jesse's post regarding Nora. Remembering how she had asked for prayers for Nora, Jesse noted,

On Christmas Day 2014 Nora smiled. She was almost sitting up. She had her NG tube taken out days before and was eating independently for the first time in months. She only had one short seizure. She was bright-eyed and healthy. She was happy. God was with us in those miracles. But God was also with us in our brokenness and unanswered prayers. Nora wasn't cured. She was still globally delayed. I would never nurse her again. There was no assurance that her seizures wouldn't change, or get worse. We were a thousand fragmented pieces of confusion and hurt.

But my miracle, and the forever mystery, was and is this: God is with us. And I'll wish you merry Christmas today and every day, because I believe in the miracle and mystery of Christmas. I believe in God's love for me and for my daughter. It has taken me 2 years of perspective to fully embrace this love. I don't know your cries of despair or your prayers for miracles-- but this I know... He was. He is. He will be.²

At eight years old, Nora now has a little brother and a little sister. A couple of weeks ago, Jesse updated her site with a note to sister Penelope:

Nora is non-speaking and communicates in her own way— using communication cards or her iPad, and sometimes with hums, sighs or coos. I'm not sure you heard her voice

² <https://shelivedhappilyeverafter.com/2017/11/28/its-after-thanksgiving-so-i-can-admit-this/>

as you grew inside me, and yet, even in your earliest days, you were comfortable in her arms — like you had known her all along. I don't have a sister, but I would guess moments like this is what make it so special. I'm thankful you two have each other.

More often than not, we don't have nursing care for your sister Nora. By mid-morning we have gone back and forth and around the corner for drop off, maybe an errand, perhaps an iced coffee and then back for pick up. But by noon, it's just us— the girls— and Nora (very proudly) helps me take care of you. We drink (pretend) coffee, watch princess movies, take naps, snuggle and listen to music on the floor.³

Waiting can be difficult. Hoping can be exhausting; particularly when we hope without knowing when. In the midst of the waiting, sometimes, we need to give ourselves a pep talk. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves of who we are and whose we are. Sometimes we need to remember what this season is all about: "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where *will* my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth." Friends, let us put our hope in God who made heaven and earth. Let us remember God's faithfulness in the coming of Emmanuel; let us wait in expectant hope for Christ's coming again.

Amen.

Questions:

1. What is waiting like for you? What are the things for you wait with expectant hope? How do you encourage yourself in the waiting?
2. Do you expect Jesus to return? What will that look like? What will that mean for you?
3. How much does God love you? How do you know?

³ <https://shelivedhappilyeverafter.com/2022/11/08/she-is-the-worst-birth-control-a-baby-book/>