

Lift Up Your Eyes
Psalm 121
Saturday, July 30, 2023

Let us pray: Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening. May we hear your word that leads us to life, in Christ. Amen.

It has been *seven years* since I quizzed you on something, and some of you weren't even *here* then, so let's see how many of you have been paying attention. There is a framed picture that hangs right outside the door to the sanctuary. Anyone know who painted it? (Norman Rockwell.) Does anyone know what it *says*? It is a painting of a church, a large cathedral on a busy city street. And all these people are hurrying by to get to work, while a man is up on a ladder, putting letters on the church sign that says, "Lift up thine eyes." But all the people walking by are either looking straight ahead or down at the ground, seemingly too busy to recognize the presence of God that is all around them.

How many of *us* walk by that picture every single Sunday on our way in here, and we don't even *see it*? We get so focused on getting into the sanctuary for worship or greeting people or wrangling kids or checking our phones one last time before worship begins. I know that *I* can get in a rush on Sunday mornings, doing everything I have to do to get ready for worship, and I just hurry right past it. But there are other times when I *see* it and I *stop* and I *remember* what I am getting ready *for* – to lift up my eyes and my heart and my mind and my spirit and my voice to God.

That picture needs to play a more prominent role in our life together. I think we need to *move* it, because it gets hidden behind the door sometimes. But when we *see* it, it has the power to shift our focus toward God. It's like when I was teaching my kids to ride a bike. I would say, "Focus

on that tree. If you're looking over to the left or the right, then you're going to start veering over to the left or the right. But if you are looking at that tree, and you don't take your eyes off of it, then you will ride directly toward the tree. What you are *focused on* is where you will go."

The psalmist knew that when he wrote these words. "I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?" There is a whole lot of background we could get into here about the *context* in which this was written. It is a psalm of ascent, so it was likely written and prayed or sung as people were going up to Jerusalem, which is surrounded by hills; they were *ascending* to worship in the temple. But some of the roads leading to Jerusalem were dangerous, with wild animals or robbers waiting for people to come by. So, "As I lift up my eyes to the hills that I am going to ascend, who will help me get there safely?"

If you are *lifting up* your eyes to the hills, then that means you are at a *low place*, geographically. If you have to look *up*, that means you are *down*. But for us – spiritually, emotionally, sometimes physically – when we are at low points in our lives, the *valleys* of life, where do we look, who do we look *to* for help?

So often, we look *down*. The easy thing to point to is that we look at our *screens*. My eyes are not lifted up to the hills, they are looking down at my phone. Everything I *need* is right here. Where will my *help* come from? I can *call* someone or *text* someone or connect with someone on social media. I can look up a doctor or a lawyer or a plumber or whatever else I need. I can find something that will make me laugh or distract me from the problems of the world and my life. We look *down*.

Sometimes we look down at *other people*. Where will my help come from? At least I'm not *them*. We do this weird thing where if I look down on someone else, judge someone else, or *put down* someone else, it makes me feel better about *myself*. Or at least we *think* it does.

Sometimes we look down at our *hands*, focusing on and trusting in our own ability. Where will my help come from? From *me*. I don't need anyone or anything else. I can do it on my own. I have everything I need. I am *self-sufficient*.

So, a lot of times, our eyes are not *lifted up*, they are *cast down*.

Other times, we are not looking *up*, we are looking *around*. Where will my help come from? The people around me. Now, there's not anything *wrong* with looking to other people for help. But what we often do is, "My happiness, my fulfillment, my sense of self and worth is dependent on the people around me."

Or we look to the politics and policies of this world. Where will my help come from? From *this* political party or *that* political candidate. Once we get *these* people in office or *those* policies enacted, *then* we will be safe or prosperous or happy. And again, there is nothing *wrong* with using the political process to make the world more just and safe. Sometimes that is what's necessary. The problem is when we place our *hope* in the politics and policies of this world. When we look to *those* things and *those* people to save us.

It's like the psalmist says a little later, "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God,

who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.” God can absolutely *use* those people and processes to *do* those things. But they are not the *source* of those things. The *source* of justice and righteousness and healing and love is God. And so if we want to move toward those things, our eyes need to be set, not on ourselves or other people, but on God.

And *that* is what we’re getting at in *our* psalm for the day. “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 psalmist is saying that as they make this rough, rocky ascent to Jerusalem, the Lord will not let their feet be moved; they won’t slip on the rocks. The scorching sun shall not strike them by day, nor the moon by night, because the Lord does not sleep. God watches over them both day and night. The Lord will keep them from all evil, from the robbers and the wild animals. God will preserve their lives on this dangerous path.

And so as *we* make our way through life, on the ascents and the descents, on the dangerous paths we sometimes find ourselves on, God watches over us, God is with us, God provides for us, and God preserves our lives. So when we need *help*, we know where to *look*. We lift up our eyes.

Jesus understood this when he said, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or wear, the things that you need to live. Look at the way God provides for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. God takes care of *them*, and God will take care of *you*. Don’t strive for the things of this world,” he says. “Strive first for the kingdom of God, set your eyes on the rule and

reign and power and authority of God, and you will find everything that you need to live.” Lift up your eyes and look to God.

It’s the same message we hear in Proverbs, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge God, and God will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.” Don’t look *down*, don’t look *around*. Lift up your eyes and look to God.

It is one of the simplest messages of our faith that runs through the entirety of scripture, and yet it is one of the hardest to *practice*. Because I can *see* my own abilities; those are *tangible*. I can *see* the people around me. But to trust this thing or situation to God who I *cannot* see? That’s harder. When our lives are in the balance, we want to *know* that there is something *solid* on which we can rely. Trust the wellbeing of my family to someone I cannot see? That’s a hard step.

And again, it doesn’t mean that *we* don’t do anything; that we just sit around passively and wait for God to magically take care of the situation. And it doesn’t mean that we can’t rely on other people to help us. It just means that we understand our abilities and the help of others as gifts from God; God’s way of providing for our needs. We do not look to those things or people *first*. We lift up our eyes and look to *God*, trusting that God will sometimes *use* other people and our abilities to provide what is needed.

But our *hope* is not in ourselves or others. Our ultimate hope, our *first* and *final* hope, is in God. We do not *trust in* ourselves or others. We place our trust in God. So when we’re looking at the

finances, and the numbers aren't adding up, we lift up our eyes and look to God and say, "God, I trust that you are going to give me what I need to do your will." And maybe God uses your abilities to lead you to a new job or possibility, or maybe God uses other people to help you out. When we are facing a difficult medical situation, we lift up our eyes to God and say, "God, I trust that you are going to give me everything I need to face this." And maybe God uses the abilities of doctors and nurses to bring us healing, or God puts people around you to support and encourage you and bring you meals. But we do not worry or force our own way. We lift up our eyes and look to God and *trust*, and that is where we find *peace*, in knowing that God is *with us*, whatever we face.

We are about to practice this in our life together. Last fall we recognized the need to do a long-range strategic planning process. That, coming out of COVID, we are facing a very different reality in the church and in the world around us. Things that we previously didn't have to worry about for 20 years were now concerns in the next 5-10. We needed to figure out how we as a church can adapt in order to minister to the world in which we now live.

So we started interviewing consultants, people who come in and assess the gifts and needs of the church and develop a plan for how we move forward. And what we found was that all of the consultants we talked to, while they might have had slightly different techniques, they basically all had the same approach. They come in and do a survey or some kind of listening sessions to get a sense of who we *are*, who we *have been*, and who we *want to be*. They look at the data, identify some goals, and help us figure out some strategies to get there. And there's nothing wrong with that approach. Other churches do it all the time, and it *works*. But something about it just didn't feel *right* for us. We weren't excited or energized by it.

But then we talked to another consultant. Someone we *know*, Graham Standish, who preached here on Consecration Sunday five years ago. He was one of my professors in my doctoral work, and he leads a counselling and consulting center out in western Pennsylvania. His mother used to live right down the street from the church, so he knows St. John's and the area, and he has worshipped with us before.

He started describing this process to us that was totally different than the others. It wasn't a "strategic planning" process, where we do surveys and identify goals. It was a process of discernment and transformation. Because, he said, if we want to figure out what our church is called to *be* and *do* now, surveys and listening sessions are only about hearing *our* voices. We need to hear *God's* voice and discern what *God* is calling us to be and do now. His process is not *data* driven; it is *Spirit* driven. We put together a task force of 10-12 people, and he works with them, teaching them a process of discernment. At the end of it, they put together a report that says, "Here is the church that we have discerned God is calling us to be, and here are some things that God is calling us to *do* in order to get there."

When he finished describing this process to us, we felt energized and excited and hopeful for the future of our church. Admittedly, we were also *nervous*, because this is very different than the typical process, and it's going to be some work. But it felt *right*. We're not just looking at *data*, leaning on our own understanding. We're not looking *down*. We're not looking *around*. This is a process of lifting up our eyes to God, recognizing that our help does not come from surveys or strategic plans, but from the Lord who *made* the church, who calls us to service, and who promises to sustain the church, giving us all that we need to do God's will.

The Session unanimously approved it the other week, and over the next month we will begin putting a task force together, which means that we are going to be asking some of you to serve. We know that a lot of us are tired after the past three years of hard work leading this church through the pandemic and all the challenges that came with that. But *this* is the *most important thing* that we will be doing as a church in the coming months. Besides worshipping God, this is *the most important thing* we will be doing. Because it will determine the future of our church.

And we need you. Whether it is serving on the task force or supporting and praying for those who are. This is an opportunity for us to practice, together, lifting up our eyes and looking to God. Trusting God. Listening to God. It's not about who *we* want to be. And it's not about who *other people* want us to be. It's about who *God* wants us to be; what God wants us to *do*. It is about fixing our eyes on God as a church. And I believe that if we can do that as a *church*, in our life *together*, it will help us learn how to do it in our *individual* lives.

So will you lift up your eyes with us? Will you look to God with us? Will you listen with us? Will you hope with us? Will you trust with us? And will you follow, wherever God leads us, together? I want to invite you to pray with me, but instead of bowing our heads and closing our eyes, I want to ask you to look up and lift up your eyes as we ask God's blessing. Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, as we lift up our eyes, from where will our help come? Our help comes from you, who *gave* us life, who *redeemed* our lives through your death and resurrection, and who *sustains* our lives through the power of your Holy Spirit, your living presence in this world and with us today. As we begin this journey of discerning your voice and your will that will lead us to the church that you are calling us to become, we pray that you would give us strength when we are weak, energy when we are tired, hope when we begin to despair, trust when we are tempted to

rely on our own ability and understanding, love and patience and peace when we are afraid. Raise up leaders in this church who can help us discern your will for our life together. And may that filter into our individual lives, helping each person here look to you in trust and *live* in ways that make that trust manifest. May we be your people, your church, seeking your will in all that we do, in Jesus' name. Amen.

