

WEEK 2: SUNDAY

I must have sung this Psalm a hundred, perhaps a thousand, times before I stopped to think about the famous first verse. (I have seen it carved above doors and mantelpieces in mountainous parts of the country, sometimes in Latin.) 'I lift my eyes to the hills': it evokes a romantic picture of the Psalmist gazing up into craggy heights with awe and wonder. And the old translation made it seem as though the next line ('from whence comes my help') was a reference to the hills themselves: I look up to the hills, because that's where my help comes from.

But of course the opening lines mean nothing of the sort. In fact, it is as the Psalmist looks to the hills that he realizes that they are not the source of his help: his help comes from a much greater place, indeed a person, namely the God who made them (and everything else as well) in the first place. Actually, the Psalmist might even be looking to the hills not as a pleasant and helpful sight, but as a source of danger: Jerusalem, surrounded by hills, could be the victim of a surprise attack. But even if we don't go that far, the opening of the Psalm appears to contrast the hills with the Lord himself, Yahweh, the creator God — even if only to say that if the hills appear great and powerful, the God who made them is far, far more powerful again.

The Psalm then launches out into a sustained praise of God as the one who watches over Israel, moving from the Psalmist's own trust ('my help' in verse 1) to an invitation: Yahweh will do this for you, too. He will not let your foot be moved; he keeps you; and so on. It's worth turning this back into a claim that we make on our own behalf: Gracious Lord, you made heaven and earth; now, I pray, don't let my foot be moved, don't go to sleep while you're watching over me, be my shade on my right hand, keep me from all evil, preserve my going out and coming in. Whether we're on the move, resting, working, leaving home and returning — at every point, the Psalm promises that the world's creator will be with us and guard us.

But if we stop there, we've only made our way into the first level of the Psalm. Lent is a great time for pausing and pondering, for reading more deeply and, perhaps, more slowly. This short Psalm is a good place to see some of the other depths. In particular, we might contemplate the fact that Jesus himself made the Psalms his own prayer book, and doubtless knew most if not all of them by heart. What did it mean for him to pray these, up in the hills perhaps, as a boy, as a young man, as the 30-year-old coming to terms with the strong and clear vocation that it was time to act? What did it mean for him to realize that the unsleeping God, who had guarded him all his life, was now asking him to go to the unguarded place, the ultimate danger zone, the hill outside Jerusalem where he would go to his final great work but would not return home in the normal way?

As we think of Jesus fulfilling and transcending this Psalm, our hearts go out as well to all those who live with the times when it seems as though God has indeed been asleep, as though the sun and the moon are hostile, as though all kinds of evil have won the day, and the comforting business of going out and coming in has been cancelled for ever by sickness, accident or a roadside bomb. Somehow, in Jesus, the promises come true again but at a different level. To see this takes courage and perseverance. As we pray this Psalm with God's suffering world on our hearts, let us pray particularly that the gap which to us seems so large, between the help promised here and the dire needs of the world, will be narrowed. And let us pray that we who

take comfort in this Psalm may bring that comfort to others who need it.

TODAY

Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, in your mercy watch over us and all your people.
Give us outward safety and an inward trust in you which will enable us to bring help to others.