

God Keeps You
Sunday, July 9, 2017
Stouffville United Church

Psalm 121

God keeps you, no matter where you are in the journey.

Two summers ago, I started following the journey of Sarah Outen, a British explorer whose dream was to circumnavigate the globe by cycling, kayaking and rowing. I picked up on her London2London journey when she left Japan in a custom designed rowboat called 'Happy Socks, to row solo across the Pacific Ocean for 150 days (almost half a year) until she reached the Aleutian Islands, off Alaska. She then kayaked down the West coast, cycled across the United States and got back in her row boat, in New York City to row across the Atlantic Ocean to end her journey where she began, in England.

Near the end of her Atlantic journey, she was blown way off course by a summer season Hurricane and had to be rescued. The seas were so choppy that Happy Socks could not be rescued and was abandoned.

Throughout her rowboat segments, I emailed her to offer her small prayers from Canada. I thought of her often, as I lay in my bed, as she continued each day and each night to make it through the loneliness, the terrible rough seas with gale force winds, along with the joys of sighting birds and fish and dazzling stars, and rendezvousing with other sailors and coast guard boats. How does one get through a journey like that, when you're becalmed for weeks, or strapped into your bed as your cabin rolls relentlessly in huge seas, and your hope is battered?

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These last 3 weeks, I have been in Chicago to begin my work on my Doctor of Ministry in Preaching at Chicago Theological Seminary. Arriving in a new city, finding your way to the residence and then to the Campus to meet your fellow Year 1 students took a lot of energy. And then studies began, from 8:30 to 5 pm every day. The first week was an indepth look at textual criticism – how you view the text, what you bring to the text, how your context informs your reading of the text. The second week was an immersion in African American preaching with the sensational Frank Thomas. The third week was working on the Learning Covenant that will guide all the week for the year and against which you will be evaluated.

Living in community as doctoral students, living in residence cooking meals for each other, working through the highs and lows of preaching for the class, spending time doing a bit of sight seeing in Chicago with your new friends, falling into bed at the end of each night, mentally exhausted. All of this was held together by a deep trust in God, that we were all there for a reason. You can't hear 25 sermons a week, you can't give 2 sermons a week without feeling the powerful story of faith and the transformative power of God becoming real in your own life and seen in the lives of others. We are from different denominations, different

countries, different languages, different cultures and race, but we all were feeling the very real presence of God guiding our lives.

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When we're in a good space, we can dream big about our God. Think of times you've stood by a lake or an ocean. And you watch the sunrise if you're a morning person or the stars and the milky way if you're a night person. And you are transfixed by the vastness and wonder of it all. There is something in our human spirit that yearns for these moments of transcendence when we encounter the greatness of God.

In Chicago last week, at chapel, I played for another first year student, Debra Kang, who is Korean. She sang You Raise Me Up, so I can stand on mountains. She thrilled us all in that moment, inspiring us all to know that God *is* raising us up to be more than we can be. Our soul is fed by such moments.

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The Psalter is the prayer book of the Bible. And the Psalms are human words that become God's words to us. Psalms 120 to 134 represent a collection of Psalms that were sung by worshippers as they ascended the road to Jerusalem to attend pilgrim festivals. We read in Deuteronomy 16:16, "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths." Each of the psalms includes a superscription, 'A Song of Ascents'.

Psalms 121 is the second in the collection. As the pilgrim embarked on the pilgrimage, the pilgrim asked the priest, "Where does my help come from?", answered by a confessional statement, 'My help comes from God, who made heaven and earth'. The priestly blessing followed, with promises that God will keep your foot safe, God will keep you from harm. God will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forever.

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When we are in a good space, it is easy for us to think upon the vast God who made 'heaven and earth'. But it *is* a distant relationship. And when we are not in a good space, when we are feeling lost, or afraid, we need God to be closer, so close that we can feel God.

Friday was a transitional day for the D Min Program. For it would be the last time we would see the Third Year's. For after this day, they would be returning home to write their Thesis' papers and then graduate in their respective classes. Deep friendships have been made amongst them and with us. In the concluding worship service of our three weeks together, the Dean anointed the Third Year Students with Oil. They stood in a semi circle while she came around. And it was like a trail of light followed her as she said words over each student, sending them on their way with this profound blessing.

Psalms 133 is the second last psalm in the Song of Ascents collection. And it brings a second priestly blessing into the pilgrim's journey. Aaron was the high priest chosen by God,

and who was the older brother to Moses. And this related Psalm invokes the ‘precious oil on the head of Aaron, the precious oil ‘running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.’” (Ps. 133:2) This is an image rich in blessing and generosity and intimacy, as the precious oil runs down upon the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.

This is the intimate encounter with God that we need when we are lost, when we don’t know the way. This is the intimate encounter with God that we need when we are the only living person for hundreds of miles in the middle of a deep ocean, with the sky and the sea and the winds in chaos around us. This is the intimate encounter with God we need when we are asking, ‘Is it all worth it?’ This is the God we need to keep us, no matter where we are in the journey.

If you are fearful in the journey, God will keep you.

If you struggle in the journey, God will keep you.

If you have lost hope in the journey, God will keep you.

If you are nearing the end of your earthly journey,

God will keep you.

No matter where you are in the journey, God will keep you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.