
A Blessing for Travelers

**A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Lent 2 – Year A**

There's a lot of talk about travel these days, isn't there? Whether you should do it or not; whether you've been recently to certain countries, or around someone who has. So it seems ironic, or perhaps serendipitous, that traveling is such a predominant theme on this second Sunday of Lent and in the Bible in general.

As early as the twelfth chapter of Genesis, we meet a man named Abram, who's living the good life in Haran when God calls him (by name, no less, so there's no doubt that God's talking to *him!*) And God tells him, to "go"—to leave everything he knows and journey God-knows-where. Of course, we know where's he going, and how the story turns out. But Abram doesn't. Not yet. All he knows is that God has promised to guide him. And he goes anyway.

So begins a long tradition of Jews, Christians, and Muslims making journeys in faith, or for faith—a tradition reflected in our psalm today, Psalm 121. It's considered a "psalm for travelers," and it bears the superscription, "a song of ascent." It was probably a prayer for ancient pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem.

This summer, some of us from the Cathedral are joining that procession of pilgrims to Jerusalem; and I, for one, have been reading everything I can to prepare! I want to know exactly where to go and what to see, how to stay safe, and how to orchestrate the spiritual experience I long for. I want to know how to get from the airport to our lodging, and how on earth you get a sherut. I *don't* want to look foolish or helpless, or have to depend on the goodwill and guidance of strangers. Or, it seems, of God.

What a far cry from ancient pilgrims, who didn't have sheruts or planes, or cell phones, or internet, or travel advisories. They didn't even have Rick Steves! They really did have to go in faith, traveling by foot or animal through desert and hills. These weren't the gentle, inviting hills of Virginia, mind you! This was hot, scrubby, rocky terrain. A fall there, or a long day in the sun, could mean sickness or death; and even a night under the moon, it was feared, could bring on lunacy. And that's not all. Those hills were believed to be inhabited by evil spirits, and they were populated by shrines to other deities. There were physical and spiritual dangers lurking everywhere!

Can't you just see that pilgrim of old, standing at the edge of her safe village, eyeing those frightening hills that stand between here and wherever she hopes to be, taking a deep breath, and praying, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where is my help to come? How will I ever get through this?" Then, in this moment of doubt and fear, she recalls what she knows, or hopes, to be true, and really needs to be true now: "My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Oh, let it be so!"

Have you ever prayed like that? In a moment of doubt and fear, praying your way into believing your own convictions all over again? "My help comes from the Lord. Oh let it be so!"

"Oh, it is so!" answers the rest of the psalm: "The Lord will not let your foot be moved; and he who watches over you will not fall asleep." Maybe this second voice is the pilgrim talking to herself, or a neighbor or fellow traveler encouraging her. Maybe it's a priest blessing her, in some kind of pre-pilgrimage liturgy. Maybe it's God, praying in her. Surely it's all of these.

Whoever is speaking, the message is the same: "God watches over you, keeps you, preserves you, guards you." It's all the same word in Hebrew, *shamar*, which shows up six times in these eight short verses. This promise, this assurance, gives the pilgrim the gumption to go to begin with—in the same way that children may

venture farther, or try new things, when they know that watchful parents are nearby.

Not all journeys are chosen, of course. Sometimes, we, like Abram, have a move or change thrust upon us. We have to leave a home, school, relationship, job—a way of life, or a phase of life. We find our certainty, security, or even faith in tatters. Our old understanding doesn't really work anymore.

But even when we don't choose these scary journeys from one thing into an unknown next, we *can* choose how we travel. We can choose to travel with the humility, curiosity, and trust of pilgrims. We can choose to see the changes and chances of life through the lens of pilgrimage, and faith; and we can approach them with the intention, or expectation, of encountering God and being made new.

Perhaps the greatest journey is the one we take from life as we know it, through death, into the mysterious life beyond. When I am accompanying the dying or the bereaved, I often turn to Psalm 121. I hear its assurance, and offer it as a blessing for this journey, just like ancient priests probably did for pilgrims before they set out: "The Lord will keep your going out, and your coming in, from this time on and forevermore."

At that greatest of thresholds, and at all thresholds—at the beginning and end of all the journeys of our lives—, we lean on the promise that the Lord is our keeper, wherever we go. The Lord himself watches over *you*. The Lord will preserve you from evil—from being undone by evil. The Lord will guard your soul. So you may go in peace.

In this season of Lent, we *do* choose to take a kind of pilgrimage, a spiritual journey that joins us with the journey of Jesus and takes us through the wilderness and through our fears: fear of our mortality, sinfulness, powerlessness to fix all the things we want to fix. We don't know exactly how it will all turn out, but we practice traveling in faith, turning to and trusting in God. And we, like pilgrims across time and around the world, go with this blessing.

Whatever threshold you're standing on, whatever journey is yours to take, whatever you see in those hills, whatever you fear, I hope you will pray this psalm, over and over. May you hear God's promise, and receive this blessing. And may you pass it on! Especially today, when fear seems to be the fastest-spreading virus around, may you witness to God's steadfast love and providence and watchfulness, and may you bless others with your peace.