



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Lent 2 (A)
March 1, 2026

RCL: Genesis 12:1-4a; **Psalms 121**; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Opening Prayer |

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen*

Context |

The Book of Psalms is a collection of hymns composed over centuries by multiple anonymous authors, though many psalms are attributed to King David or King Solomon. The psalms are divided into five main sections, and there are multiple subsections. As with the chapter and verse markings in Scripture, such divisions were adopted over time.

The psalms contain multiple genres of poetry, from hymns of praise to petitions (both individual and communal) and songs of thanksgiving. They employ multiple literary forms, including acrostic poems and antiphonal verses, which convey a tension between the first and second half of the line. For modern readers unaccustomed to ancient Hebrew poetry, these literary forms can be difficult to identify or understand. But for three thousand years, people have been reciting and praying the psalms, finding in them reminders of God's call, care, and concern for humanity and all of creation.

Psalms 121 is one of the fifteen psalms (120-134) identified as a "Song of the Ascents." These psalms may have been used as pilgrimage songs by people making the journey to Jerusalem to visit the temple after it was rebuilt following the Babylonian exile.

Theological Reflection |

Scholars suggest that Psalm 121 would have been sung antiphonally, as a dialogue, with verses alternating between two choirs. These days, it remains common to pray the psalms in our Sunday services antiphonally, but we might be more familiar with instructions to read the psalms "responsively," with a lector leading and the congregation responding, alternating verse by verse.

The simple antiphony we use in our churches today might enhance our ability to appreciate the psalm as a prayer, since the act of responding to a lector echoes our responses in the Prayers of the People and our Eucharistic liturgies. As we listen and respond, we are brought into the words of the prayer.

In ancient Israel, more complex forms of antiphonal recitation were sometimes used, and some scholars suggest that Psalm 121—with its eight verses easily divided into two equal sections—would have been performed using what’s called *steady responsa* antiphony. In this format, two choirs would alternate lines from different parts of the psalm. This antiphony results in a dialogue, alternating at the half verse, between the two halves of the psalm, dramatically reordering the text and impacting our experience of it.

Here is how the verses line up in *steady responsa* antiphony:

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| 1a. I lift up my eyes to the hills; | 5a. The Lord himself watches over you |
| 1b. from where is my help to come? | 5b. the Lord is your shade at your right hand, |
| 2a. My help comes from the Lord, | 6a. So that the sun shall not strike you by day, |
| 2b. the maker of heaven and earth | 6b. nor the moon by night. |
| 3a. He will not let your foot be moved | 7a. The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; |
| 3b. And he who watches over you will not fall asleep | 7b. It is he who shall keep you safe. |
| 4a. Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel | 8a. The Lord shall watch over your going out and
your coming in |
| 4b. Shall neither slumber nor sleep | 8b. From this time forth for evermore. |

Whether the psalm is read in a linear fashion, verses 1 through 8 in order, or alternating, line by line, between the two halves, the text is hopeful in tone and affirms the psalmist’s – and our – trust in God as the source of salvation and ongoing support. The psalmist lifts their eyes to the hills and remembers that God is close by.

Throughout Scripture, mountains are places where God’s presence comes close to the people. Moses encounters God on Mount Sinai. Elijah experiences the still, small voice of God on Mount Horeb. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus climbs up a mountain to get some distance from a gathered crowd, and begins to teach his disciples, showing them how to love God and one another. At the close of his ministry, Jesus and his disciples climb a mountain and experience the presence of God with Jesus’s transfiguration.

As you read the words of this psalm, imagine a procession of people walking on pilgrimage along an ascending road leading to the holy hill. Travel is always risky, but they are going somewhere important, worth the risk. They raise their eyes to the mountain and remember that God watches over them. God cares about their wellbeing. They remember other travelers, their ancestors, who traveled many years in the wilderness between Egypt and the promised land, guided by the God who shielded them from the sun’s burning rays during the day. There is no need to fear the night; God protects them from evil and keeps them safe from the dangers of the road. These travelers know and affirm that God keeps watch over them. God’s providence does not wane. God’s care for the people is eternal.

The psalmist's words are meant for travelers at every stage of this pilgrimage of life. They are a song to bolster us as we ascend whatever hills rise in the path ahead of us. They remind us of God's presence and provision on the rocky road we tread. We are never alone. Look to the companions beside you; look to the ones who have gone before; but especially look to the hills and remember the one who made heaven and earth, and who journeys with you and within you.

Reflection Questions |

- What "hills" do you look towards when you need to remember God's presence and providence in your life? (They might be place, or people; memories or sacred texts.)
- When have you experienced God's enduring care for you? In what dark nights have you known God's wakefulness?
- Where in your life do you need to ask for God's presence or provision?

Faith in Practice |

This week, pray this psalm. Let its words open you to the possibility of encountering God. As you rest in God's promise of care and safety, consider how you might take a risk for something important. How can you demonstrate God's enduring love and care to the people you meet?

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