

"Inside Your Backpack"
Psalm 121 & Matthew 10:1-14
Rev. James Ramsey ~ August 31, 2014

What's in Your Backpack?

**CAP HAITIEN, HAITI, INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT,
2:30 P.M. – EARLIER THIS MONTH.
SECURITY CHECK POINT:**

"Present your passport, please, sir. Step forward. Please place the contents of your pockets, your jewelry and metal items in the bin, along with your shoes.

(Pastor hurriedly takes off watch, cross, tie tack, sandals, empties his pockets, remove shoes and places them in the bin!)

"What about your belt?" (Oh, yeah, sorry.) "Arms out, sir. Feet apart. Look forward, please."

"Step over to the agent at the table, please. Open your Carry On for inspection. Take out the contents, please, sir. OK. Stand over there."

I did a lot of traveling this last month...carrying my backpack through one checkpoint after another.

Before we put everything back together, let's pause on this side of the security check.

We blessed backpacks today because our children and youth will be traveling this week, traveling back to school. They will pack and unpack and repack their backpacks every day.

We are all travelers. All on a journey.

So what's in your backpack? What are you carrying around in your pockets... your purse – your mind and your heart? I'm serious, take a moment and think about it.

I always carry a comb. OK that's a joke. I have never carried a comb. My Dad carries a comb – even now, in the nursing home, even though his hair has thinned considerably. Jo always has lip balm. A lot of guys carry a folding knife of some sort – a handy thing to have. I used to carry a small multi-tool, but I had it confiscated years ago at an airport checkpoint, actually.

I want to talk about the essentials we carry with us – what we really need for our journey– and what we don't.

Psalm 121 helps us get our priorities straight. More than one person has told me over the years that this psalm conveys exactly what they believe, that God is with them and will never leave them. "I lift up my eyes unto the hills."

Scholars imagine Psalm 121 would have been sung as people hiked up to the temple in Jerusalem. It is a steep road through the desert and very dangerous. This

road, from Jericho to Jerusalem, will be the setting for Jesus' famous Parable of the Good Samaritan. You might remember that the Samaritan is mugged and left a beat-up mess in the ditch. It's always been a road full of robbers and thieves. Jesus may very well have sung this psalm with his parents when he was 10, walking up this very road towards the Temple.

This psalm reminds us, reminds travelers, what you need to take with you as you begin a journey. It's good advice for the beginning of a school year, for sure, but I would suggest it's a good psalm for all of us, even if our school days are far behind us. Whether you are off to Pre-School at Deer Lakes Nursery School, Kindergarten at Pine-Richland, Curtisville Elementary, Deer Lakes Middle School or Hampton Area High School or even higher education, like W & J, R.I.T, Allegheny College or Duquesne University, there's good direction here. Even if you will bypass schools on your way to work on Tuesday or you stay home, attending to the responsibilities and duties of life and family – the Psalm reminds us what is most important.

The first two verses contain everything we need. The remainder of the verses simply comment on what we hear there:

"I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where will my strength come?
My strength comes from God who made heaven and earth."

"I lift up my eyes unto the hills". To be a good traveler you have to look ahead, make yourself aware of your surroundings, what is coming next. You have to be observant...to notice. Someone once said, "that to be awake is to be alive." It's important to be awake, alert, to pay attention, in order to be a good traveler.

Losing focus, being distracted, wandering around oblivious – this can lead to troubles. An airport maintenance man once told me of trying to help a lost woman find her car in the almost endless parking lots of Pittsburgh's International Airport. She described to him exactly where she believed her car to be and it made no sense to him. Finally he had to tell her that none of the landmarks she was recalling were familiar to him. They were both befuddled, until the worker happened to inquire, "Mam, what city do you think you are in?" She replied in a rather curt manner, "Why I'm in Charlotte, why do you ask?" This woman had somehow gotten off her plane, retrieved her luggage, walked through the Pittsburgh Airport, with the PA System all the way welcoming travelers to Pittsburgh International Airport, strolled past the statue of Franco Harris making the Immaculate Reception, left the terminal and found her way into the middle of one of our parking lots and all the time imagined she was in Charlotte. "Mam," the worker said, "I don't think you are going to find your car tonight."

Sometimes we believe ourselves focused, so focused on meeting our goals, being productive, being competent that we miss what is right in front of our eyes – what is really important. We miss life.

We are all so plugged in – we have our smart phones, our laptops, our i-pads, notebooks and Samsungs. We are so well-connected, so intent on our texts and our Facebook pages and our insta-grams that sometimes we don't see what is beyond our

tiny screens, what is on our flanks, or what is right in front of us. Maybe sometimes we need to get unplugged in order to get plugged back into life.

Technology can serve many good purposes, but it can also blind us to what is really important. It can keep us in our own little virtual worlds, missing what is happening in the real world.

My family was on vacation last week at the beach on Tybee Island, Georgia. One of our favorite things to do is to watch for dolphins. Sometimes you can go for hours and never see a fin or a spout. The ocean is flat and calm and there is no sign of life. Sometimes the dolphins are easy to spot, they frolic, porpoise, blow air out of their blow holes. Sometimes there is a large pod and you can see many animals at one time splashing and feeding, while still more are underwater. But other times you really have to focus to see the dolphins amidst the waves. They barely break the surface with their dorsal fins and are visible for just a second. If you look away, or are focused on something else you miss them. Sometimes you had to wait a long time for them to resurface.

We learned that to pay attention you have to be quiet. And patient. Sometimes, very patient. And then, someone would cry out, "There they are!" And we'd all turn and look and then there's a dolphin leaping completely out of the water! Wow! We never got tired of that!

Before we begin this school year, this new season, this next phase of the rest of our lives, before we hoist our backpacks and our briefcases, let us lift up our eyes unto the hills! Let us notice where we are and where we are headed. Let us take stock of who travels with us.

Jesus was the great noticer. He knew where he was and where he was going. He always noticed those around him. So often he saw who was next to him, reached out and offered his friendship, healing, hope, and love. He changed people's lives, just because he noticed. As good travelers, we, too, first need to notice.

Next, the Psalmist wonders "From where will my help come?" The second thing that travelers need is room to wonder. We have to have empty spaces in our backpacks, briefcases, purses and pockets. We have to make time to put things down, for rest, for Sabbath. We need time to relax. Time to get a good night's sleep. Time to dream. Time to be.

A lot of us, especially the adults, are carrying around way too much. Stuffing our pockets and backpacks with so much that we don't need. Many days last school year I would meet Fiona at the bus stop after school. I would greet her with a hug and offer to carry her backpack. It was so heavy most times, stuffed with so many books, so much stuff!

Listen again to what Jesus told his disciples about what they needed to carry: "Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff..."

In other words, you don't need a lot of equipment. Make room for wonder. Travel lightly.

Good travelers need to notice, wonder and finally, remember. They need to remember who they are and whose they are. "My strength comes from God who made heaven and earth."

Our children received a stone today, to remind them that Jesus is their foundation, their rock, their strength. It's a reminder they can keep in their backpack. We all could use such a reminder. It's why our weekly worship is so important. We remind each other, each week what is real and true.

God is with us. Nothing can separate us from God, no matter where we travel. We remind each other of that, bolster each other's faith, demonstrate the help of the LORD. We need each other as cheerleaders, mentors, examples, friends. We need our neighbors and parents, grandparents, godparents, aunts and uncles in the faith to remind us that we are not alone, that we are loved, that we belong to each other and to God.

Psalms 121 is a psalm for travelers – a good psalm to memorize, to carry around in your mind and heart as you travel. A reminder of what are the most important things we need to carry with us.

We need to stop and notice.

We need to wonder.

We need to remember.

It is what we practice every time we meet. It is the most important work we do as church, every bit as important as our ministries and missions, our community events and our outreach.

What are you carrying in your backpack, your pockets, that you need to let go of today, so you can make room for what really matters?

We will step away from church today, into tomorrow and a new week, a new season. We step into an uncertain world -- to places in our own lives that can feel wonderful or scary or lonely. Wherever our paths lead, wherever God is calling us to go – to school, to work, to home, let us carry this psalm and its wisdom with us. Let us make room in our backpacks for our faith, for God.

Stop and notice.

Wonder.

Remember.

God is alive and gives us strength.

God goes with us.

Nothing can take that away.

May God bless us, our travels this week and the backpacks we carry with us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.