

October 16, 2022  
Lectionary 29, Year C  
The 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Psalm 121  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Growing up my favorite movie was *The Sound of Music*. It might still my favorite, it's definitely in the running. And apparently, I am not alone. *The Sound of Music* enjoyed extraordinary success when it was first released as a movie and has had continued success since. Here are some statistics:

For more than half of 1965, *The Sound of Music* was the number one movie at the box office. Within a year and a half, it had replaced *Gone with the Wind* as the highest-grossing film of all time. It was also the first to earn more than \$100 million at the box office. And it remained in theaters for four and a half years. More than a decade after its release, ABC paid \$15 million—nearly twice the movie's budget—to show *The Sound of Music* on TV once.

<https://www.avclub.com/all-these-years-later-the-sound-of-music-remains-one-o-1835655764>

Apparently, the movie *The Sound of Music* is continuing to make its creators or their estates money still today.

I grew up before VCR's and DVD players or blue ray players or streaming, so I had to wait for a movie to be shown on TV if I wanted to watch it. And, happily for me, beginning in 1977, NBC began to air the movie every year for the next 20 years. In my house, this broadcast was an event and my family never missed it.

We got a VCR when I was 12 for 13 and the first VHS movie that I ever owned was, guess what, *The Sound of Music*. Which meant that I could watch

it any time I wanted to. And I did. It got to the point that I knew every line, every song, almost every movement of the movie I watched it so much, with my family, and by myself.

So, it's kind of shocking, at least to me, that I was the age that I was before I realized that the Reverend Mother was quoting scripture when she said to Maria, at the end of the movie, as the family was on their way to hide in the abbey's cemetery from the Nazis who were chasing them, "I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help."

*The Sound of Music* begins with Maria running through the mountains singing, "The hills are alive with the sound of music, with songs they have sung for a thousand years," and ends with scenes of the loving von Trapp family making their way through those same hills to freedom and safety in Switzerland. So it makes sense for the last words spoken to Maria by her mother in faith, by her spiritual advisor, by the one who set the whole story in motion by sending Maria to the von Trapps are words telling her to look to the hills for help. "I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help."

Those words, I came to learn are the first verse of Psalm 121, our Psalm for today. As a child and early teenager, I knew *The Sound of Music* like the back of my hand, but I was less familiar with the Bible. It wasn't until much later that I realized that the Reverend Mother, in using the quote from Psalm 121 the way that she did was misquoting scripture. Or, if I want to be more charitable toward my favorite movie, and I probably do, she was taking a more "Lectio Divina" approach to scripture, using it more for what it meant to her in that moment than for what it meant in its original use and original context.

Because the Reverend Mother makes it a statement, but in scripture, it's intended to be a question. "I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?"

Most of the Psalms are really difficult to date. Some of them do come from David's time, some likely written by King David himself, but there are 150 Psalms and David's time and David's pen do not account for all of them. One of the Psalms, Psalm 137, was definitely written during the Babylonian exile, so that's pretty easy to date. But most of the others do not come to us from any specific time in Israel's history, nor from any specific person. They represent the prayers and the laments and the hymns of Israel's spiritual life and worship, many of them having to do with journeying to the Temple. In fact, for the past few months our in-person worship service has begun with words from one of those pilgrimage Psalms, Psalm 122, which starts with the words, "I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"

We don't know exactly what time period our Psalm for today, Psalm 121 comes from, but it's believed to be a Psalm of farewell, words spoken over pilgrims who were leaving the Temple grounds to return home after being at the Temple to make sacrifices or to celebrate a festival. Upon leaving the Temple itself, located on Mount Zion, pilgrims would have had to travel through the city, and then up into the hills that surrounded Jerusalem, by roads where wild animals and bandits were known to lurk. In order to get back to their homes, their towns and villages, the way was often perilous for them.

For them, the hills were alive with threatening dangers. So, as they stood at the gates of the Temple about to start the journey, their liturgy, their

worship placed a question on their lips, “I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?”

Their liturgy, the Psalm, also gives them the answer, in the next verse, when the pilgrims were invited to say with confidence, “My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.”

Those were the words that they were to take with them on their journey.

Perhaps the rest of the words of the Psalm might have been spoken to the pilgrims by the priests as a parting benediction,

<sup>3</sup>The LORD will not let your foot be moved  
nor will the one who watches over you fall asleep.

<sup>4</sup>Behold, the keeper of Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep;

<sup>5</sup>the LORD watches over you;  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;

<sup>6</sup>the sun will not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.

<sup>7</sup>The LORD will preserve you from all evil  
and will keep your life.

<sup>8</sup>The LORD will watch over your going out and your coming in,  
from this time forth forevermore. (Psalm 121:3-8)

The words of today’s Psalm were intended to give people who were about to depart into a potentially dangerous world comfort and courage for their journey.

The people who originally heard and spoke these words were also people who had been on a pilgrimage, on a retreat. They had been in the holiest place in their religion, the Temple, the place that their faith taught them was the literal footstool of God. When they were there, they believed that they were in the physical presence of God.

If you have ever been on a retreat or have ever gone on a pilgrimage, perhaps you know the feeling like something like that can give you, the heady rush of the sense of proximity to God, the sense of being away from the daily grind and able to focus, to see and hear more clearly, to be still and experience God's presence. It's possible that you even get a sense of that experience in worship here at Emmanuel, when you take communion, when you sit in silence at some point during the service, when you sing a hymn that speaks to you, that sings in your heart, when you see a friend who you haven't seen in a while or when you see the joy of a child who delights in worship.

It is good to have those times of retreat, those moments of communion, those glimpses of the presence, the nearness of God. In fact, some people call them mountaintop moments, "The hills are alive."

Today's Psalm was written for people who had to make a long journey home, for people for whom the winding hilltop roads were not places of beauty and safety, but places of danger and fear. It was written for people who were leaving the place where they knew God was and heading back to their ordinary lives, back to the stresses and pressures of work and family. Back to the worries of politics and the strain of making a living.

And the words that they were given as they departed what they called God's house were words that told them that wherever they went God was with them, watching over them, never sleeping, always faithful, journeying

with them, watching over their coming and their going, their waking and their sleeping, with them on their journeys and in their stopping places. With them in the valleys and on the hilltops.

And those words, spoken over those long-ago pilgrims are words for us too. Spoken by us, and for us, that wherever we are, and wherever we go, our help comes from the Lord, and God is with us. Amen.

For our Benediction for today, instead of the one printed in your bulletin, I am going to speak over you some of the words of today's Psalm:

And now, all of you gathered here today, receive these words of blessing:

<sup>3</sup>The LORD will not let your foot be moved  
nor will the one who watches over you fall asleep.

<sup>4</sup>Behold, the keeper of Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep;

<sup>5</sup>the LORD watches over you;  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;

<sup>6</sup>the sun will not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.

<sup>7</sup>The LORD will preserve you from all evil  
and will keep your life.

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from this time forth forevermore.