

"TO THE HILLS"

Psalm 121, Romans 8:37 - 39

There comes a time in everyone's life when they need an escape route, the need to escape. "O God, to get away from here!"--an urgent, desperate prayer. It may be for many reasons: Too much heat, too much pressure, too many responsibilities, a multiplicity of problems at home or on the job, wherever, pain of body or mind, irritating personalities one has to live or work with. All of a sudden, whatever it is, it's insufferable. One can't bear it, put up with it a minute more. A man accused of desertion of wife and child--"I ain't no deserter, your honor", he said, "I'm an escapee!" The old controls are slipping, so the yearning: "O to get away from here!"

The 121st Psalm begins with just such a situation. He is a man facing a problem he cannot solve. All of his best effort, and the trouble is still there. A reasonable man, he's thought it through; a pious man, he's prayed for an answer; and a pragmatic chap, he's done everything he could do--but the situation--ah....the situation--it has not changed. Morning, noon, and night it's there to plague the life out of him. We do not know what the cause of his distress was--but whatever it was--for him it was like living in a nest of hornets--in theological short, it was hell.

So that by the time the Psalm opens--he's yelling for help and looking for an escape route. Like Jonah--down in his whale of a depression--he's shouting--"Let me out of here!" But where to go? When a man has reached the running stage, where does he go? In which direction does he flee to get away from what he can no longer get on with? An escape route? Well in that desert country, where the psalmist lived, there was only one way to go for a get-away and that was up: "To the hills!" "To the mountains"--so he lifts up his eyes--and there they are, those hills--strong and secure on the horizon--secure and clean they seem--above--far above--the dangers of the desert --away from it all--"to the hills". High they seem to him--above the mess he's in--thus holy too--separate. So he draws in his breath--lets out a long sigh--the escape route is open to him: "I lift up my eyes to the hills." Beach Mountain--here I come.

Now then, there are four or five things I can think of that these hills could have represented for him--considering the stress and strain he was under. In the first place--maybe those mountains just beckoned a much needed holiday. He was bone and blood weary ("tired blood") and desperately needed a rest. Haven't you ever needed a mountain retreat to

recoup the scattered forces of your soul? Or maybe you take to the open ocean, or a foreign fling, or the fairways, or a trout stream, or a hunting trip, or a shopping spree: Everyone to his own kind of mountains, I say. (For me: usually no further than Apex or Eckerds.) But it's a change of scene--a real escape--recreate--to re-create--and we return to the flat land, once again ready to take on the whole hive of hornets... You understand? Of course you do! Summer is the season for escape. But just how much lasting help is there from a holiday? It can't last forever. One must return home to take up the task again--so from whence cometh my help?

In the second place it could be the mountains in this psalm represented something quite different for this old Jew. He had lived all his life under an austere Israeli morality--under the close confinement of the ten commandments--all his life he'd lived with Moses breathing down his neck--"thou shalt" -- "thou shalt not" yet he obviously still had his problems--that great pain--whatever it was--something the unbudging law did not cure--so those hills--atop which the Canaanites celebrated their wild, orgiastic feast of pseudo religion--sacrificing themselves to their sensate gods--their Baalism--forgetting their problems and pains in the furies of fabulous feasts and wild dances and laughter of much liquor --maybe it was these hills that beckoned --tempted him--to narcotic forgetfulness--as they tempted so many of the Jews of his day--to the despair of the prophets--and as they tempt us today--through our slick page magazines and TV, "the plugged-in drug--tempting us to escape--out of an ABC bottle or XYZ pill--and you're "on the road" to sweet forgetfulness, old buddy--and--absolute disintegration and destruction. Were these then the hills that tempted him? The escape route he suddenly saw? Well, the orgy is very old and very new. It may be taken separately from or in combination with the conventional vacation. But how much help is in these hills? "From whence does my help come?"

So, there is a third and fourth possibility of what those hills of escape could have meant to the psalmist. In the third place--they could have stood for armed protection. If he were one of a pilgrim caravan--on the way to Jerusalem--encamped at night on the desert floor--around a little campfire--huddled close to other pilgrims--for fear of the outlaws who always lay in wait to rob those laden with rich gifts to offer at the temple upon the end of their journey--if this were true, then he would have been looking to the hills surrounding their campsite for the outposts of the caravan--the guards--armed sentries stationed on those hill tops with swords and stones--standing watch throughout the night to warn of danger and defend in case of attack. But the psalmist may well have wondered would they fall asleep? Indeed were they strong enough? So he lifts up his eyes unto those hills and

wonders--How much help would they be? How puny are a few swords and stones against an outlaw mob. "From whence does my help come?" (A bomber?--a missile?) Where is security in this world anyway?

In the fourth place--maybe those hills were simply a city man's contemplation of encompassing nature--and that from the heat and hectic horror of his business day--he drew a holy calm just from looking up--and drinking in a beauty and perfection from the cosmos far surpassing what small loveliness and order he could bring from the human chaos. So is the soul sometimes soothed by a sunset--or as I remember, by the midnight flight of a heron sharply stirred from her marsh grass at night--or by the wonder of a sleeping child's peaceful countenance upon his pillow--or by the stars that still transcend our sputtering about in space. Sometimes the hills of nature beckon like the very home of the soul--and we lift up our eyes--and breathe deep and to us comes a gentle peace. But how much lasting help is here? Even here? Oh--"From whence does my help come?" Everlasting help? And there is so much else that is escape from the sordid and drab and dull and painful in the world. There is art and music and crafts and books and plays and friendship and love.

"I will lift up mine eyes to the hills"--says the psalmist. But whatever those hills represented for him--in terms of escape from his problem--or protection--they were all of them together still not adequate. He finds no ultimate security there. For others? Maybe so--but not for him. For when he lowers his eyes from these horizons--he continues to muse: "Whence cometh my help? My own help?"

And all of a sudden the answer is upon him. But it is no new answer for him. It has been the answer to his life's longings all his life long. It has already sustained him in the past through hours far more desperate than these. In the midst of many a perplexity--it has been his answer and his peace. So no new thought to him. His whole life had been based upon it. It was only that--just for a moment--under the pressure of this particular pain--he somehow had forgotten it--but not for long--not for long-- "my help?" "my help?"--why my help is not in those hills-- "my help is in the Lord", who made those mountains--and all things in heaven and earth. Nature but reflects for me, says he, the name of its creator. But the God of the great cosmos is yet close enough to care for me, he says. The Lord is my keeper--my protection on my right hand. And though I may need a holiday and would even try to get away from God--He needs and takes no holiday from me. He neither slumbers

nor sleeps. So I may rest and to His over-arching providence and care--I can trust my own life and the keeping of those I hold dear, and I need not fear.

Here, indeed, is life's most ultimate security--trust God and do one's best--leaving the outcome in stronger hands.

(Quote Psalm 121)

Prayer - Romans 8: "Who, O Lord, shall separate us from your love?"