

August 21, 2016 Psalm 121 Picnic...Potluck Lunch Sunday

Psalm 121 always reminds me of home. I don't mean Belleville, even though it would be the logical designation of home. And I don't mean the farmhouse which has been in our lives since 1989. I am talking about Port Arthur or as it is currently named, the north ward of the city of Thunder Bay. You see one of the things I learned from childhood during the tradition of the Sunday afternoon drive, was that whether you went East on the Trascanada, or West on Red River Road, or north on Spruce River Road, it would not be long before you would be into hilly country. And by the way, if you went south some would say you wound up in Fort William. But the truth is you would wind up in Lake Superior.

It was in the hills, east, west and north of the city that I learned to fish and hunt, that I spent a lot of time out in the Bush, walking trails that honeycombed the hills that surrounded the twin cities, or as it is currently named, Thunder Bay. Without a whole lot of Biblical insight in my youth, I loved the hills. And it came as no surprise when I came to faith and began reading the Bible that Psalm 121 would draw a simple conclusion about the hills...a spiritual equation. "I lift my eyes to the hills...where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth."

The Biblical equation is that it is among the hills, with your eyes drawn to the highest hills (some of them are legitimately called mountains), that it is on the highest places in the land, that one is physically closest to God, our helper, our maker, our sovereign Lord, who made the heavens and the earth. It also seemed marvelously logical to me, that south of Kaladar there is a hill, just beyond a sweeping curve on highway 41 that is marked and signed by the province of Ontario as being one of the best places to look at

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the night sky. Free of ambient light because there is no community of size within 10 km. Of the place, people gather at night to see the stars and the moon, and the wonders of how small we are as people in light of the creation that God made, and that we enjoy.

I lift up my eyes to the hills...where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Now, it took our trip to Israel to slightly adjust my view of the hills. You see, I always thought of the hills, as an area you had to travel to arrive there. That insight works on this level, that the quest to be near to God is an active quest, you have to work at it. In fact what our Israel, walking in the footsteps of Jesus tour taught me is something a little more profound. In Israel, you are almost always going up hill, or down hill. Some of those hills are genuinely mountains.

But many of them are not. The point is Israel is a rolling land. To travel through it you must climb and descend, only to have to climb and descend again.

And the lesson the land teaches us, the land of Jesus, is that you are never far from God. He is always close to hand. There are places in the city of Jerusalem where you can see nothing but the buildings that surround you. But on a top of one of the hills, you can stand in place and rotate, and see houses built on that hill, and that one, and that one, and so on...never unable to see the hills from whence comes your help, namely the Lord. And who is Lord? Silly boy...the Maker of heaven and earth, the God introduced in the 1st chapter of Genesis, as the first book of the Bible. The implication is that only a fool would not know who the Lord is. Among the hills...it is so obvious. Even the hills of Northwestern Ontario!

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One of the blessings that those hills in Galilee and Judea provide, is the raw power, to cause that one life giving river, the Jordan, to flow the best part of the full length of the nation. It is only when you take out an atlas and look at the modern state of Israel, surrounded by her neighbouring states that you see how singularly blessed Israel is. First of all it is a relatively small country, which means that for centuries and centuries one river, and one lake, has been enough of a water supply to provide the water needed to grow crops, to irrigate land, to water livestock, to support that single nation. One is tempted to say, but Egypt has the Nile. And more land by volume, and therefore it has always been a much more vulnerable nation. The lack of water makes all of the Arab states more vulnerable than is Israel. And for a people of faith that becomes the root of the idea that Israel is a land of milk and honey. A land gifted by God to the people who call it home. A land in which the hills surround. A land in which the Lord who made heaven and the earth is always so close and caring like a shepherd for his chosen people.

It still surprises me that my native hills north, west and east of Port Arthur played such a role as they did in my spiritual evolution. There was a brief time in my earliest teens when I boasted to friends that I was not superstitious, and that there is no God. I can still remember as I had turned 16, and qualified for my very own hunting licence, I remember the first time my father handed me the gun and several bullets and said, "I'll have a cup of tea with your mother. You can walk this trail on your own." The gun was a single shot .22 rifle little more than 36 inches in length. When I walked out of sight of the family car, I remember being overcome by fear. The trail was just a footpath. I was surrounded by nothing more than trees and brush. Rocks and trees and water. And yet to this day I am

convinced it was my first experience of knowing, such that I would never dispute the fact again, that I was in the presence of the Holy One, the maker of Heaven and Earth.

I turned the corner in the trail, and there was a partridge, (ruffed grouse) and he stood there on that branch while I calmed my breathing and took aim, and headed back to the road and the car and my father with my prize. I remember the swelling of pride when I saw my father's smile. All he said was, "We heard the shot. Not bad for a beginner." I took one last look down that trail before I got in the car. Somehow, I just knew I should be saying thank you. I didn't. But I never felt afraid in the bush among the hills in the rest of my Port Arthur years.

What Psalm 121 captures so well, is that there is something special about being in the high places of the landscape no matter where you are, The Hebrew mind and soul calculated that such wonderful places...and in Israel today....many high places are still characterized by the word wilderness. But not wilderness in the sense of rocks and trees and water. Wilderness rather in the sense of rocks, and sand, and the reflected heat and light of the sun. Because that land is fundamentally desert. Uninhabited, desolate, uncultivated and barren. It was to such a place Jesus would withdraw from time to time to pray, to seek the presence of His Father, whose business he was about, and aware that HE was about. HE would know His Father's Spirit in such a place.

The truth is so may we. The hills and wilderness, no matter how we define it, are places where one can experience God in a special way. But always remember, it is not automatic. Being in the wilderness and among the hills is no guarantee of a revealing of

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God experience. There is something else that is involved in that I have learned. Somewhere, in some part of the mind and heart of a man or a woman, such things only happen when we are looking for God's presence. One of the lessons I learned in my teen years was that I wanted to find God, or more accurately, I wanted to be found by Him. I learned something else on that footpath in the wilderness on a warm autumn day north of Port Arthur...to me it will always be Port Arthur. I learned I did not enough to know who God is. And the moment I looked inside a Bible I discovered at the very first HE is Lord...Maker of the heavens and the earth and all that lives upon this planet. It changed the way I saw blue sky, or clouded sky. It changed the way I saw a night sky when the conditions are such that you can see all of the near to us, stars and planets.

The summer is moving very steadily to a close. As Canadians the summer is the season in which most of us spend time, a significant amount of time out of doors. We are mindful of the wind. We feel its warm caress. We are mindful of the stars, because we are most likely to be out of doors even in the evening and as it transforms from evening to night. It is in the summer we complain when it rains and miss it, when it fails to come. In the summer we have traditions around cutting the grass and tending to flowers, and removing what we call weeds. We connect with the land on which we are living even if it is a paved street or a gravel road. And somehow that reality makes us mindful that God is real. And His word reminds us HE is the maker of all that we see, as we look about us, out of doors. The Maker of the Heavens and the Earth.

Blessed are the hills of my youth. For in this sense as Psalm 121 reminds me, they always lead me home.

Let us pray;

Lord we give thanks for summer time. Especially summer as we experience it in Canada. For the songs of song birds thank you, Lord. For the voice of the crow and the blue jay and the chickadee, thank you Lord. For the shapes and contours of the clouds. For great winds and gentle breezes, we thank you Lord. For the creeks and rivers, the lakes and waterfalls, thank you for their sustaining power. Thank you Lord for the hills, and the places we have walked among them. For fields and those who allow us to walk their land. But thank you most of all for being our Lord, the creator of heaven and earth. Amen