

Faith Mennonite Church  
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God's Good Creation  
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## **Our pilgrim journey** Psalm 121; John 14

Most of us associate summer with some sort of travel. Perhaps an extended road trip. Perhaps time away at a cabin. Maybe some bicycling or backpacking or canoeing or sailing. And generally when we think of travel we think positively: of a new adventure, of gathering with extended family and kin, of taking in scenery that we've never beheld, or returning to a well-known place of sanctuary and spiritual healing.

But all travel, all journeys (like all of life) contain risk. Cars break down, storms pass through camp grounds, ticks bite, accidents happen along the trail. Yet these risks and the past experiences of danger and calamity do not diminish our desire to travel, to journey on. We know the blessing of journey, including the unexpected bumps along the road, and so we plan the next trip, careful to build in some precautions based on past experience and learning, but eager to set out again.

While we often use the metaphor that "life is a journey," the opposite is also true: journey gives us life. Psalm 121, which we read this morning, is one of a number of Psalms of Ascent. These Psalms are associated with the upward journey to the temple in Jerusalem, songs sung by pilgrims in anticipation of worship, or in thanksgiving during their return home. Since Jerusalem was located on a mountain, the journey to the temple was an uphill ascent.

Although ancient pilgrims and travelers didn't have to worry about vehicular breakdown, they faced other traveling perils. Traveling on foot, along winding mountain roads, they were vulnerable to wild animals and thieves and to the harsh elements, particularly the hot sun. But the joy of reaching the temple, of returning time and again to this place of worship and spiritual grounding, was worth the risk. While many might only come once a year, their journey was buoyed by their faith in God, the very God whom they believed created the rocky path on which they walked and the sun and moon that shone down on them.

Psalm 121 is filled with assurance that God will protect the traveler. We don't know whether this was a prayer at the beginning of the 4,000-foot ascent to Jerusalem (if one was traveling from the north or east) or whether this was the blessing of the priest upon the pilgrims as they were about to set-out on their return trip home. In either case, the message says over and over: God will keep you.

God is a keeper. God, who made the grandeur of heaven and earth, keeps us as we walk on the earth, as we sleep and as we move about, as we come and as we go, our whole life through.

But what if our going out doesn't bring us back home? What if our journey takes us to a new home? The promise of God's presence and protection certainly goes with us wherever we go; that is constant. The journey of relocation is certainly a greater disruption than a mere vacation, even an extended time away. For in moving to a new home, we must go through the process of sorting through all the treasures (some more valuable than others!) we have accumulated. What do we leave behind and what do we take? In saying goodbye we realize the deep value of relationships that we sometimes take for granted in the busyness of our lives. Both

of these processes help prepare us, both for the journey, and also for the arrival and the process of forging new relationships, assembling the physical pieces of our life, thinking anew of what it is that God calls us to be doing in the world--how best to use our particular gifts and skills.

In all of these ways, journey gives life. But just as our initial arrival, our birthing into existence, came about through the pain of childbirth for our mothers, each new journey, each new birthing opportunity that comes to us, brings its own element of pain caused by something we must leave behind, something severed that we value.

While Psalm 121 offers a big umbrella of God's protection as creator and keeper, the words of Jesus recorded in the 14th chapter of John, speak to that very deep and tender interpersonal place of pain in the face of departure and separation. Jesus lived intimately with his closest disciples, and many others followed at a near distance. They depended on him. They found healing and meaning and direction from his touch and his teaching. And then he said, "I am leaving you, but I am not leaving you orphaned.... My physical presence will not be with you, but my peace will remain. ...If I am with my Father, with God, I can be with you in ways you cannot imagine."

Annette and Chris and Orv and Cleta have been part of our church for more than a decade. We have been home to Sam and Maggie since they were born. Each of them has participated and contributed in ways that have brought us so much joy, so it's no wonder that our hearts are troubled as they depart. Yet we claim, by faith, that God is going before them to prepare the way for their new journey. We give thanks that they are moving out in faith, willing to venture and dare, to be a part of God's work in another setting.

As we prepare to bless each of these families, let us take some time in silence to consider and give thanks for the gifts we have received from them and also to consider how God is present to each of us at this moment in our journey.