

“On the Other Side”

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Genesis 12.1-4a

Psalm 121

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At the end of my trip in Ireland we were on a tour bus for the final few days. We would ride for hours, and then jump off to see something for less than a half an hour. One of our many stops was to go through a bunch of trees called the Dark Hedges. It's popular because a scene in the *Game of Thrones* was filmed there, but I have never seen it, so I was less sure why we were stopping to see some trees. But, a friend on the tour asked me to walk with her, so I did. At the very least it meant getting off the bus and walking.

To find the trees we had to take a path, it wrapped around a small store and bathrooms, past the house of James Stuart who had planted those trees we were about to see, and beyond a road. Stuart planted the trees in the late 1700s to keep people from approaching his house. If I understand it correctly the hope was these trees would grow to be ominous and people wouldn't want to travel through them. That did not happen.

Originally there were 150 beech trees but due to storms and human carbon footprints, there are less than 90 now. My friend and I walked for a while. And walked some more. And kept walking. We had limited time off the bus, but we were determined to make it to the end – the problem was that we couldn't see the end because of the trees curving this way and that.

Eventually, we gave up, and turned and ran back to the bus – the last ones on it. We didn't see what was at the end – and I probably never will. And I didn't understand the Game of Throne reference, and, again, never will. But that time of laughing and talking with colleagues was important – again, it was the journey that was most important, not the trees itself.

The Psalm reading today mentions mountains and hills, which is why I asked for pictures of mountains – and you did not disappoint! I enjoy receiving these pictures because it gives me a new perspective – shows me places I haven't been, and sometimes tells me a bit about yourselves. So, thank you for sharing. These mountains are beautiful, carved out in different ways, accessible or inaccessible. Each mountain has a story – one we may never know.

I believe we can assume that the psalmist in our reading today is sitting in the valley, looking up. Scholars think this psalmist was possibly preparing for some sort of battle, but definitely beginning a journey.¹ It is the deep breath before a long journey to the unknown. It's beginning at the Dark Hedges, not knowing where it ends, starting a new adventure, with hopes and worries, it is approaching the wilderness and asking for protection from God.

¹ James H. Evans, Jr. “Psalm 121” in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 56.

What does protection look like? In the face of the unknown, I don't know that we can guess. We can conjure up scenarios – natural disasters, unexpected events, illnesses, but what lies on the other side of the mountain, on the other side of the trees, is probably less scary than anything we can work up inside our minds. Various translations of this passage use different terms – one uses “keep” and another “preserve,” asking God to sustain us, preserve us, keep us safe.² What does that mean to you?

Last night I read a book to the kids called *My Father, the Dog*. It goes on and on comparing the silly things the dad does to the things a dog does, and it ends by saying, “Mom says we can keep him,” and one of my kids aptly said, “But we don't keep people. They are their own.” I immediately thought of this passage, because theologians never can truly turn it off, I think, and I wondered what it means to keep someone. We belong to God, but we aren't like pets or things – God doesn't collect us like objects. I believe I can follow the idea of keeping us safe better than preservation, knowing that we were made from ash and will return to ash. God will only preserve us so long in this form.

I'll return to those trees in the Dark Hedges. Those trees were planted nearly 250 years ago. They have started to become damaged, some because of age, some because of humanity carving it and driving by. The roots are showing because of erosion, meaning they don't have 250 years left. There is a preservation group working to keep those trees alive as long as possible, but in the past ten years natural disasters have knocked plenty over. If we wish to ask God to preserve us, what does that mean? What do we ask God to preserve knowing we are dust and to dust we shall return?

When I seek God for help, sometimes I ask God to preserve the values in tact within me – to speak truth, but to do so in a way it will be received. I ask God to preserve endurance within me, to keep going when I can't see beyond the trees, beyond the hills, and I don't know what comes next. I might sometimes ask God to preserve my body when I feel aches and pains and wish them away, but I also ask God to preserve things that are less tangible.

Our second passage is about Abram. His given name was Abram, and then later God renames Abram to become Abraham - which means father of many nations. His name hasn't changed yet, and he is still at the beginning of his journey. He has no idea where he will go or what he will meet on his journey. God has called him on this journey and he must follow God; he must lift his eyes up to the Holy One, because God is going to preserve his ancestors.

Abram is in Haran, a city whose name means “Crossroads.”³ He is at a point of decision. Which way will he go? Will he follow God or turn away? When have you been at a crossroads? Who do you turn to in the midst of crossroads? Do you have friends or family that support you in decision making?

² Robert W. Fisher, “Psalm 121” in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 56.

³ Donald P. Olsen, “Genesis 12.1-4a” in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 52.

What about the church? Are we at a crossroads now? I believe we are always at a crossroads, sometimes they are small forks in the road, and sometimes they are larger decisions. Right now, we're in a crossroads post-stay-at-home covid. We make decisions about what events we do, how do we invite people, and what new things are we doing in community? What do we keep the same, and what do we change? I'm inviting you all to listening sessions throughout March. Details are in the newsletter. These will be times when you have the opportunity to share your ideas, your thoughts, your laments, your complaints. My goal is to simply gather information, listen, and it will help me to have a fuller picture of the congregation and where we move forward at this crossroad.

We cannot see past the mountain. We cannot see beyond the trees. But I do not think we can make a bad turn - only to stand still too long is a mistake. Let us move ahead with integrity and love and justice, lifting our eyes up to God and trusting in God's preservation. Amen.