

“The Lord is Your Keeper”

“The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.”

The ALS Ride for Life is an annual fundraising event that takes its participants on a journey across the entire length of Long Island from Manhattan to Montauk. The Ride supports research and support for persons and their families affected by Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (commonly known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease after the Yankees player who died from the disease), a disease that paralyzes people because the brain is no longer able to communicate with muscles of the body that are typically able to move at will. Over time, as the muscles of the body break down, someone living with ALS will lose the ability to walk, talk, eat, swallow, and eventually breathe. There is no cure for ALS, and approximately 80% of people with the disease die within two to five years of being diagnosed.

- “In ALS, motor neurons gradually break down and die. This means that the brain can no longer communicate with the muscles of the body. As a result, the muscles become weak and eventually someone living with ALS will be unable to move them.” – ALS Society of Canada.

I became involved with the Ride for Life when the route was scheduled to pass by our church building in Rockville Centre and we were asked to provide a rest stop for the riders and their companions. I was also asked to welcome the riders and offer a prayer of blessing for their journey. We were of course honored to extend hospitality to these travelers and were glad that the weather on the day of their visit turned out to be perfect. As the time of their arrival approached, we were busy preparing drinks and snacks for our guests, and I prepared a short service of blessing for persons on a journey. But I wasn’t prepared for what I saw when our guests arrived; it was a crowd of some 100 people who were led by a dozen riders in motorized wheelchairs, persons with ALS who were taking the arduous 130 mile journey across Long Island. One family in Holy Trinity had a son-in-law who had died from ALS, and they became my guides as I was introduced to each of the riders, their families, and the people who were supporting them in this sojourn. As I shook each of their hands, I was struck with both the weakness of their physical grip and the strength and determination that was on their faces; while they knew that their disease was incurable, they were determined to take this difficult journey to raise awareness of their disease and funds for research one day no one would die in such a horrific fashion. Their bodies may have been weak, but their spirits were strong.

As I was about to welcome our guests and begin my prayers, I was approached by the wife of one of the riders, who asked if I could read one specific Bible passage that had become a favorite of the travelers: Psalm 121, the “Psalm for Sojourners,” a liturgy of blessing for one about to leave on a journey:

- “I lift my eyes to the hills – from where is my help to come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth ... the LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night ...the LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.”

Psalm 121 is the second of the Songs of Ascents in the book of Psalms, psalms that were sung by pilgrims on their journeys to the holy city of Jerusalem. It describes the sight that these travelers would have

seen on their pilgrimage, looking to the hills of Jerusalem that Mount Zion, a symbol of divine help, the place where God sits upon an earthly throne:

- “Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King.” – Psalm 48:1-2.

Pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem knew how dangerous this journey could be; Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan takes place on this road and describes the journey of a man who *“fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.”* (Luke 10:30). Even if these travelers were not accosted by bandits, the difficulties inherent in traveling in ancient times meant that one would be looking for strength and support to help them reach their destination. For these faithful sojourners, the answer to their question *“from where will my help come?”* is in the people’s confession of faith that *“my help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”* In our translation, LORD signifies the name that God reveals to Moses on Mount Sinai: *“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’”* The Hebrew word YHWH (often rendered “Yahweh” in English) is the specific name that identifies the Lord who created the heavens and the earth, the Lord who brought Noah through the flood, the Lord who made a covenant with Abraham, and the Lord who rescued his people from slavery and Egypt and brought them back to the Promised Land. It is the LORD who is at the heart of the faith of Israel, expressed in the people’s confession of faith known as the *shema*: *“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The people looked to the hills for strength and support because they knew that the one who created and abided upon them would be present with them to protect them and deliver them safely:

- “The psalmist does not look to nature for help! Those hills, after all, might be hiding some threat, some predator. The psalmist’s help comes from the very one who made the hills, the heavens and the earth: God! The hills may obscure some threat, but they also by their very existence bear witness to the creator.” – Rolf Jacobson.

The pilgrims’ confidence in God’s steadfast presence includes the assurance that *“he will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.”* (121:3). This image of a person traveling on foot can also be used metaphorically to describe God’s activity to preserve people, *“who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.”* (Psalm 66:9). The verb “moved” communicates the stability of Mount Zion, which is to be a symbol of the people’s security (*“I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.”* – Psalm 16:8). The blessed assurance of these travelers is confessed in the repeated use of “keep” (*shamar*), which recalls God’s protection of the whole people of Israel following the Exodus during the journey to the promised land (*“... for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed”* (Joshua 24:17). Despite the fears that sometimes came over the people in times of peril (*“Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!”* – Psalm 44:23), the psalmist assures the people that *“he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”* (121:4). No matter what challenges or dangers they may encounter along the way, these travelers have the assurance that *“the LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.”* (121:5). The metaphor of God as “shade” or “shadow” most often occurs in the phrase “shadow of your wings” (*“Guard me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings”* – Psalm 17:8), an image that may derive from the winged creatures that decorated the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple. The image

affirms that the God who resides on Mount Zion is also present in the journey, protected God's people so that *"the sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night."* (121:6). For the traveler on foot, the sun could be deadly (*"... they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching heat nor sun shall strike them down"* (Isaiah 49:10). Ancient people also believed that moonlight could be harmful; the word "epileptic" literally means "moonstruck" (one of the diseases Jesus cures in Matthew 4:24), and the English word "lunatic" derives from the Latin word of "moon." These verses affirm God's constant vigilance; God is always able to help (*"For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save them from those who would condemn them to death."* – Psalm 109:31). The people live in confidence that *"the LORD will keep you from all evil"* (121:7) because their very lives are the real object of God's care. Every departure and arrival will be under the care of God now and forever (*"Blessed shall you be when you come in and blessed shall you be when you go out."* – Deuteronomy 28:6). As St. Paul would later state in his letter to the Romans, there is no place, no time, and no circumstance that will be able to separate God's people from God's loving care:

- "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." – Romans 8:38-39.

The words of Psalm 121 took on a new meaning as I read them in the presence of the ALS riders, many of whom were reciting the words with me with tears streaming down their faces. These were no ordinary words from an ancient text; they were powerful words of trust and confidence that would guide them both on the physical journey to Montauk and on the medical and emotional journey that they faced with this horrendous disease. It was one of the most holy moments I have ever experienced; and as the service ended and we bid the riders farewell and *bon voyage*, I knew that all of their journeys would be in the presence of the one who promises to abide with us, bless us, keep us in his care, and assure us that *"neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever."* (ELW Hymn 781).

- "This is therefore the wisdom of the Christians, to endure the plans of God and to persevere by faith in the promise that has been given, for it is indeed sure and firm, and the Lord's covenant is faithful, according to the statement in Psalm 121:4: "Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.' ... For as God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), so it is impossible for Him not to exercise care for us, especially if we adhere to his promise. For if this is firmly apprehended, it is impossible for us to be forsaken, because God is true." – Martin Luther.

My encounter with these intrepid travelers was not the only time I was privileged to be in their presence. The next year, I was invited to come out to Montauk for the worship service that concludes each year's Ride for Life. It was a time for celebration at the successful completion of the long journey and a time to remember those who had died from ALS in the past year. As the riders arrived at the church, I saw some familiar faces from our meeting in Rockville Centre the previous year; I also noticed that some of the riders from the previous year were no longer with us, and their photographs were now in the garden of remembrance. It was a very emotional service in which family members lit candles in memory of their departed loved ones, shared stories of their courage, and offered loving embraces and support to their fellow mourners. I felt deeply honored to be invited into this holy occasion, and I was especially privileged to give the benediction at the conclusion of the service, familiar words that took on a new meaning that day:

- "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." – Numbers 6:24-26.

This familiar blessing was designated for the time of Israel's departure from Mount Sinai (where the people had been camped for almost a year) and the continuation of their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land, and was to be used daily throughout their journey. The primary name for God is used, and it is the God of Israel who is the primary actor to bless, keep, make his face shine, be gracious, lift up his countenance, and give people to God's people. *"The six verbs together cover God's benevolent activity from various angles and state God's gracious will for the life of the people."* (Terence E. Fretheim).

To "bless" testifies most basically to the work of God, signifying any divine gift (spiritual, earthly, and bodily) that directly or indirectly serve the life, health, and well-being of individuals and communities. As in Psalm 121, the blessing assures the people that God will "keep" them, *"a specific blessing given to those with concerns for safety, focusing on God's sheltering people from evil and its effects, especially pertinent for wilderness wandering."* (Fretheim). No matter what dangers or obstacles the people will encounter on their journey, they have the assurance of God's abiding presence and the promise that God will keep them in his care, protecting them along the way and bringing them safely to their destination.

- "To be under the almighty protection of God our Saviour; to enjoy his favour as the smile of a loving Father, or as the cheering beams of the sun; while he mercifully forgives our sins, supplies our wants, consoles the heart, and prepares us by his grace for eternal glory; these things form the substance of this blessing, and the sum total of all blessings." – Matthew Henry.

As I watched the people to whom I had offered this blessing leave the memorial service, I knew that their lives would continue to be difficult. Those who were living with ALS would face the inevitable affects of the disease, with their bodies slowly weakening and their independence diminished. Those who loved these persons would be dealing with the challenges of providing for their daily care as they faced the inescapable result of an ALS diagnosis, knowing that the people they loved would be gone from their sight far too soon. Yet I also saw determination and faith present with them, because they continued their journeys with the confidence that God was with them to bless them, keep them, strengthen them, and assure them that no matter what might happen to them physically, they were always in the presence of God who is *"our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."* (ELW Hymn 632).

- "I know the things that happen: the loss and the loneliness and the pain ... But there's a mark on it now: as if Someone who knew that way Himself, because He had travelled it, had gone on before and left His sign; and all of it begins to make a little sense at last – gathered up, laughter and tears, into the life of God, with His arms around it!" – Paul Scherer.

Our journeys may not be as arduous as the path travelled by the ALS riders on Long Island, and the imminence of our mortality may not be as acute; but we begin each day not knowing with certainty what challenges or obstacles we will face, but abides with us always, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is with us always in our Lord Jesus Christ. As God's people have looked to our Lord for the confidence to set forth each day in trust and hope, we continue to live with the assurance that God will *"give us grace that we may know that in the darkness pressing round it is the mist of sin that hides your face, that you are there and you do know we love you still and our dependence and endurance in your will is still our gift of love."* (Gilbert Shaw).

May the Lord bless us and keep us this day and unto everlasting life!

Amen.