



# still waters

home church studies

## Psalm 121

[Worship]

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills-- from where will my help come? 2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. 3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. 4 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. 6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. 7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. 8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

### Consider:

[Words]

It is by the power of God that we may begin anew. Everyone knows about being mired down, fatigued, discouraged, or even immobilized. Everyone in such a state knows that one cannot be a self-starter and lift one by one's own effort. We are not and cannot be that self-sufficient! These readings are studies of exemplars of faith who have begun again by the power of God.

Father Abraham is in a state of hopelessness, because he and his wife Sarah are barren and have no heir. And then God intervenes and addresses Abraham and Sarah. God commands them to go in obedience, and promises them a radical, durable newness if they go. And they go! They receive a new land and eventually they receive a son who will be their heir. They had a future opened for them. Their story is all about the power of God's promise. Paul's exposition in Romans 4 takes Abraham as a carrier of the newness that is to be initiated again by God's grace so that all can begin again, not by merit or worth, but by God's ready power. Indeed, not only human persons can begin again. But so it is even with the world. For the creator God calls worlds into being that do not exist, even as the Lord of life "gives life to the dead" (Romans 4:17).

John's gospel concerns the case study of Nicodemus, the Jewish teacher. He is invited by Jesus to begin again, to be born "from above" (3:3). He does not quite get it, and so he disappears from the text. But the point is clear enough. The God who loves the world is the God who gives new life to those in it, because God's spirit-wind blows freely where it will (John 3:8). It is the wind of love, the offer of new life that is inexplicable and quite beyond our control.

Both the Abraham text and the Nicodemus text entail going where we have not yet been ... into God's new life. For that reason Psalm 121 is a fitting companion

piece. That psalm is about a journey, being safe on the way even if the route is dangerous. Thus we can imagine father Abraham being one for whom God will "neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4), and Nicodemus being invited to be kept by God in his "going out and [his] coming in" (verse 8). The journey is to God's newness again; we may be safe in God's care as we travel. – Walter Bruggemann

[Scripture]

## John 3.1-17

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.