

“Mountain Sunday”

Based on Psalm 125

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I love mountains. Don't you? From a distance you aren't sure if what you are seeing are mountain peaks or purplish clouds. But as you get closer, you make it out. Driving up the mountains, ears popping, the air is fresh and crisp. The smell of the pine trees is intoxicating. Listening to the burbling and gurgling streams, wading into a clear mountain lake, feeling the chill of the water while looking over the perfect reflection on the surface of the green meadow and thick woods all around. The sky is a dark blue. The clouds a little closer to the ground. And then you get to the summit where you can look around for miles. Sometimes small puffy clouds float by below where you are standing as you feel the gusty wind on your face.

Mountains are sacred places. Maybe it's just because on top of them you are closer to the sky. Many cultures have identified mountains as places where contact can be made with the divine. Take the Bible for an example. Moses got the Ten Commandments on top of a mountain. Elijah saw God on top of a mountain. Jesus was transfigured before his disciples on top of a mountain. When he opened his heart to the Father before his arrest, Jesus was on the Mount of Olives. We could go on and on. And it should not be surprising. For those of us who have had the privilege of spending time on the summit of a mountain, we sense God's presence. The lyric in John Denver's song "Rocky Mountain High" rings true: "You can talk to God and listen for his casual reply." Mountains are truly majestic.

Mountains symbolize stability. Jesus plays off of that according to the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 17:21 we find Jesus saying, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." And we all go, "Yeah, right." Mountains don't move. They can erode over tens of thousands of years. The Appalachian range is a great example. But you can't just move a mountain. Wildfires can burn up the

trees. Heavy rains can create mudslides. Mining companies can remove the tops of mountains. But whole mountains don't go anywhere. They will stay right where they are. Mountains are stable. They are the perfect landmarks.

Mountains also have excellent strategic value for protection. It's a standard battle tactic: you want high ground. Kids play this at recess, king of the hill. The one on top has the advantage. It's a lot harder being below and trying to get up to the top when you have someone above you pushing you back down. But not only that, if you have the high ground the stone you throw at your enemy is going to come at them a lot harder and farther than your enemy throwing a stone up at you. Not only that, having higher ground means you can see your enemy coming from miles away, giving you plenty of time to prepare. It's a no brainer to build your castle or your fortress on the tops of mountains. Jerusalem, for example, is built on Mount Zion. It is much safer to be on the top of a mountain than on the bottom.

These two aspects of mountains, stability and protection, is being picked up on in the psalm we heard this morning. "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever." Stability. "As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time on and forevermore." Protection. How more protected can you be, living on top of a mountain surrounded by mountains? That's a pretty good place to be. So these first two verses of Psalm 125 are stressing the point that God is our protector and never stops being our protector, a stable, constant presence. And not only that, those who trust in God also will not be moved. They will be able to stand against the onslaught, whatever comes their way, because they trust not in people, not in their own strength, but in God, the creator. God is like a mountain...stable and protective. Those who trust in God are like a mountain...stable and protective. Protective of what?

This psalm is bold in the claim that God is our protector and putting our trust in God makes us unmovable. But it is not naïve to the reality that although God is our protector, that doesn't mean evil has no impact. History clearly teaches this. God's protection didn't prevent Israel from being invaded. Jerusalem has been reduced to rubble more

than once. The Temple that existed when Jesus was alive got torn down and paved over by the Romans, who renamed Jerusalem, literally erasing it from the map. God is our protector, but that doesn't mean we are untouchable. That doesn't mean that evil can wreak a lot of havoc and destruction.

The psalmist is aware of this. She notes in verse three that scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land. This assumes that the scepter of wickedness shows up from time to time and attempts to do just that, to rest on the land, to occupy the land, to claim the land as its own dominion. The psalmist says it will not rest on the land so that the righteous won't be tempted to stretch out their hands to do wrong. Again, history is the teacher. For example, in those times when Jerusalem was invaded and occupied, many of the righteous found themselves tempted to take hold of the powers that be, to join with the victor, to be collaborators with the oppressors. Maybe it was for survival. Maybe it was the idea that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Maybe it was out of a place of disillusionment. God had failed us. We are a conquered people. We must accept our oppression and allow it to become the new normal. And so they capitulated, forsaking God, forsaking their own identity, turning aside to their own crooked ways, as the Psalmist puts it. Have you ever determined in your mind to accept the status quo, even though you know that the status quo is corrupt and not what God has in mind? Have you ever given in or given up? I have. The temptation of surrendering to the scepter of evil is a real thing. God is our protector. God is immovable. But evil is real, is a threat, makes an impact, must be resisted. Just because God is our protector does not mean that there is no struggle.

In this struggle, we do have reason to hope. We heard that hope being claimed right in the first verse. Those who trust in God cannot be moved. In the face of evil, in those hard times, where all around us we see threats to the community, where we see violence, hateful speech, people treating other people like objects, greed, scapegoating, and on and on, in the midst of all of that, we still claim that those who trust in God will not be moved. Trusting in God...that is where hope lives. After all, evil may have a scepter, but God is like a mountain. And evil can

take its stick and whack that mountain all day and all night, the mountain isn't going anywhere. Oh yes, evil can leave a mark. Evil leaves traces of its presence on the mountain. But that mountain is steady. It abides forever. So yes, evil can make its impact, and it can hang around for awhile. But the Psalmist, in hope, proclaims that the evil scepter will not rest. It will not stay. It will not always occupy the land which God has allotted to the righteous, to God's children, to God's creation. The land does not belong to evil. The land belongs to God. So there is a struggle. But there is also hope. Evil will not endure. God endures.

Psalm 125 is a hopeful and confident prayer that God is our protector. Yes, life is hard. Yes, we get hurt, sometimes by our own actions but many times by the actions of others. Yes, we all experience trauma. But lest we think God isn't much of a protector, remember that what God protects is our hope, our courage, our goodness. God protects our souls. God protects us from despair.

We can be protectors as well. As we seek to live our lives in imitation of God, as God's children, we can strive to take on the characteristic of a mountain. With God's help, we can stand firm like a mountain. We can protect others from the influence of evil by doing good, by speaking a word of encouragement, by reminding people of who they are, beloved children of God. We can protect the earth, resisting those things that are harming nature and doing what we can to protect and restore nature, through recycling, making consumer choices that benefit sustainable agriculture, and more. We don't have to settle for how our economy and way of life negatively impacts creation. Trusting in God, we can do good, we can proclaim peace and do the work necessary to restore wholeness in ourselves, in our families, in our communities, in our world. Trusting in God, and confronting the scepter of evil, we can stand strong and protect the land.

As I worked on this sermon, this song kept coming to my mind. I'm going to go out on a limb a little and finish this message by inviting you to join me in singing it. It's an old spiritual called "I Will Not Be Moved." In the message I talked about us taking on the characteristic of a mountain. This song calls us to be like a tree planted by the water. It's

the same idea, that with God's help, we will not be moved in the face of evil. So let's sing this song together.