

Psalm 121- Preached on February 17, 2008

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.*

Matt and I celebrated Valentine's Day by going to a nice dinner at Red Lobster. We had a pleasant evening and then came home and turned on the news. The report that evening was about the school shooting at Northern Illinois University. The report said that at least 18 people were injured and six had been killed. The shooter took his life after firing upon a class of geology students.

Valentine's Day will never be the same for the students at NIU. What a horrible day of bloodshed and terror for those young people. And it seems almost ironic that the psalm for today, Psalm 121, says, "The Lord will keep you from evil". That didn't happen on February 14 for the students at NIU. They were in danger, and some lost their lives because of an evil act.

And so what do we do with that? What do we do when we know that evil things happen in this world? Evil is present...and we can see it every day. Robberies and murders; Scandals and lies; Abuse and neglect.

How do we believe a promise such as "The Lord will keep you from evil" when we turn on the news and see that yet again, another act of homicide on a school campus has occurred?

We can hear the second part to that sentence, "the Lord will keep your life." Even though these students were victims of an evil act, we can believe the promise that even in death, they belong to God. During their lives, God was with them. During the terror of being in that classroom, and then having to face the horror of being shot, God was with them. God was right there, with each and every student, embracing him or her. And God was with them as they passed from this life into eternal life. The Lord never let their lives slip from his grip. "The Lord will keep your life."

And we hear this promise being spoken for each one of us. The day we were conceived, God was there, forming us. The day we were born, God was there, rejoicing over us. The day we were baptized, God danced with us. When we go through life's difficulties, God struggles with us and embraces us. When we go through fear and anger, God is there. And when we laugh and are filled with joy, God laughs with us. And when we pass from this life into eternal life, God walks with us, never letting us go, and then welcomes us with open arms into the kingdom of heaven.

Yes, the students were victims of an evil act. But their lives were not in vain. One of the victims, Dan Parmenter, was a sophomore and a finance major. His friends described him as being the perfect description of a student leader. One person said, "He just had a heart of gold, and it is sad to see it taken away."

Another student, Troy Chamberlain, was wounded. Troy had been an editor for his high school's newspaper, the Spartan Voice.

Patrick Korellis, a 22-year-old senior from Lindenhurst, Illinois was shot twice by the gunman. Korellis' former Spanish teacher at Antioch Community High School, Shari Demeritt, said she had Patrick as a student for two years and he was one of her favorites.

"He is just a doll," she said. "He was my shining star, an A-plus student. He has so much opportunity and potential and is very bright." As of Friday, Patrick was listed as being in good condition.

Maria Ruiz Santana, suffered gunshot wounds to the chest. Maria was airlifted to Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove, Illinois. She was in surgery Thursday night and was listed in critical condition. She is a junior majoring in criminal justice at Northern University.

Why spend time talking about these students? Because they matter. Because we can so easily jump to accusations, because we can so easily start blaming the government or the school or the officials on duty that day...and that's not what is needed. What matters right now is that we pray for the students who were shot, wounded or killed, and pray for their families and friends.

It seems that we truly live in a society that feels unsafe. There are acts of evil all over the place. Shopping malls and schools. Grocery stores and apartments. Homes and airports. Trains and planes and buses. What are we supposed to do?

One thing that we can all do, is to be sure that we are not people who perpetuate acts of evil. We are baptized into Christ Jesus. We are baptized into a name that brings life. We are baptized into a name that brings peace.

In our old testament reading, we hear that we are a blessed people. We are blessed because we belong to God. And with that blessing comes a very important responsibility. We are blessed so that we can be BLESSINGS to others. Blessings, not curses.

In our lives we have a choice. We can do harm to each other, or we can be blessings. We can turn from acts of violence and injustice, or we can perpetuate that evil that already abounds so rapidly in our world.

And this can also be looked at on a smaller scale. Each and every day we are given opportunities to either be a blessing or a curse. What we say to others...and how we say it. Words have a powerful impact on us.

We can be a blessing or a curse when we encounter those whom we do not agree with. Do we continue that cycle of conflict...making comments that only make the situation worse, or do we try and look past our own selves and try and see the others point of view?

And for our younger folks in the congregation who are in school...how do you treat your fellow classmates? Bullying and teasing are such a large part of the school community. Do you take part in that or do you instead choose to be kind to your classmates?

And we can be a blessing to others who may not yet know the story of Jesus Christ. There are people who may not know what it means to live a life of faith, of following a person who was nailed to a cross for our sake. To help others to see the joy that comes from living a life following Christ is a blessing in itself.

The point is that each one of us has the choice between being a blessing or a curse. We can choose to perpetuate evil with evil, or we can choose to break that cycle and choose good...which is the way of Jesus Christ.

And that is one reason why we gather here at worship each week. We hear the way of Jesus read through scripture and song. We hear that Jesus chose good over evil. We hear that Jesus Christ chose the cross, the symbol of love and humility for each one of us, rather than choosing the way that would bring him glory and power.

We look to the cross and remember that we are not gods. We are not perfect. We are sinful people. But that is why we need the cross. So we don't become so self-focused that we don't even realize when we are committing a sin. Because that is when evil things will happen – when we choose to follow our own ways rather than the way of the cross.

We, as believers in Jesus, choose GOOD and not evil. We come to the communion railing today and kneel down. This is an act of worship. It is saying that we need Jesus Christ in our lives and that we humble ourselves enough to kneel down and receive the body and blood of Christ.

And when we receive that bread and wine, we receive the grace of God. We receive that grace and take it home with us. God goes home with us, strengthening us and helping us to make choices that give life rather than take it away.

These are indeed difficult times in our world. But we can each be a beacon of light to others. We can go from this holy ground, into the world knowing that Jesus is with us. And no matter what happens to us in a world of uncertainty, we know that the Lord truly does keep our lives. We belong to God.

We belong to God as we mourn so many lost lives due to senseless acts of violence. We belong to God as we try and make sense of how these acts can keep happening. And we belong to God as we choose the way of the cross, the way of goodness, rather than evil.

May you remember the choices you have, and always choose the cross. Amen.