

A Psalm for Slippery Slopes

Sunday, March 8, 2020

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Psalm 121

Any good author knows that point of view, plot and characters are all integral aspects of storytelling. Authors also know that the *setting* is critical. Where does the story take place? An author must help the reader feel, see, and experience the setting. So, when studying the text before us today, we cannot ignore the “place” or the setting of Psalm 121.

Author Robert Caro wrote definitive biographies of New York urban planner Robert Moses and former President Lyndon Johnson. In his recent book, *Working*, Caro, defines “sense of place” as “helping the reader to visualize the physical setting in which a book’s action is occurring.” He says this is important in biographies because accounts about real people should not just be a collection of facts. The facts are crucial, of course, but once the facts are established, says Caro, it is equally important “to enable the reader to see in his mind the places in which the book’s facts are located.”

Caro believes, “If a reader can visualize them for himself, then he may be able to understand things without the writer having to explain them.” This is because a place evokes emotions that the affect people who live there, even after they are no longer in that place. For example, in Lyndon Johnson’s case, Caro helps readers experience how lonely life was for LBJ as a child by describing the sparsely settled Texas hill country where the future president lived.

There are certain places that profoundly affect us. A visit to a childhood home conjures up fond memories. Standing on a mountaintop evokes a deep spiritual excitement. Sitting by a stream induces a sense of peace and tranquility. Walking by the seashore arouses our sense of awe and wonder at the scope of creation. What is your favorite place? Why? What emotions does it evoke in you?

Some places may leave us feeling anxious or afraid. Attics and basements conjure up images of spiders and rats. Old houses, with their creepy sounds and dark shadows, summon ghostly hallucinations. Cemeteries raise specters of the dead. Caves elicit visions of bats and snakes. What places scare you? Why? No doubt, places leave their mark on us.

Israel’s hills. Psalm 121 suggests that Israel’s story cannot be told without mountains. Israel is a mountainous place. Thus, when the psalmist says, “I lift up my eyes to the hills,”

he is seeing what every resident of that land sees and by which they are affected. In the Psalms, mountains often denote stability, divine protection and awe. Mountains serve as conduits between earth and heaven, and symbolize God’s formidable presence, strength, and unsurpassed majesty.

Psalm 36:6 says of God: “Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains.” Psalm 65:6 says that God’s strength is greater than the mountains. Psalm 76:4 praises God who is more excellent and more glorious than the mountains. Psalm 87:1 says that God is a solid foundation as sturdy as a mountain. Psalm 125:1-2 compares God’s presence around God’s people to the mountains that ring Jerusalem.

Psalm 121 is a little different: it is not clear that the hills are symbolizing God in any way. The psalmist begins by saying he is looking at the hills, but he follows that up by asking, rhetorically, “from where will my help come?” It is as if he is saying his help is *not* from the hills. He then answers his own question and says his help is from the Lord.

While hills were a constant factor of geography in ancient Israel, they were not always welcome features. Mountains are difficult to farm. It requires hard labor to move goods through mountain passes. The hills provided excellent hideouts for bandits and sanctuaries for those running from justice. Recall that as a young man, David spent time in the hills to escape the clutches of the jealous King Saul, who wanted to kill him. While in those hills, other men joined David, and the Bible describes those who rallied to David this way: “Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; and he became captain over them. Those who were with him numbered about four hundred” (1 Samuel 22:2).

This is not a band of men you would want to run into while tending your sheep on the hills or on your travels through the mountains. So, it could be that at least for some Israelites, lifting their eyes to the hills sent shivers down their spines! If that’s the case, then perhaps the opening line of Psalm 121 should be rephrased: “I’m surrounded by dangers from the hills. Where will I find help? My help is from the Lord.”

The slippery slope. For modern readers, even if the sight of actual hills and mountains inspires rather than scares us, there is a feature of mountains that may chill us: the slippery slope. That term is shorthand for the idea that a small action will trigger a chain of events that will lead to a negative outcome. There was a tongue-in-cheek example of the slippery slope idea that aired in a DIRECTV commercial a few years ago. The narration went like this: *When your cable company keeps you on hold, you get angry. When you get angry, you go*

blow off steam. When you go blow off steam, accidents happen. When accidents happen, you get an eye patch. When you get an eye patch, people think you're tough. When people think you're tough, people want to see how tough. And when people want to see how tough, you wake up in a roadside ditch. Don't wake up in a roadside ditch. Get rid of cable, and upgrade to DIRECTV.

This example is absurd! No one is going to end up in a roadside ditch because they choose the wrong cable company. But it highlights the “slippery slope *fallacy*” which assumes that certain events are sure to follow in a downward sequence. The slippery slope fallacy is akin to the “worst case scenario” principle which promises that the worst possible outcome is likely to happen. Here is another example: If you don't do your homework, you will fail the class. If you fail this class, you won't graduate from school. If you don't graduate, you won't get into college. If you don't go to good college, you won't get a good job. If you don't get a good job, you'll be poor and homeless. You don't want to be poor and homeless, do you?

Slippery slope thinking leads to conclusions that are unlikely to come to pass. But sometimes slippery slopes deserve our attention. Consider this line of reasoning: If the speed limit on the interstate is increased from 70 to 80, drivers who already exceed the posted limit will go even faster, and if they drive faster, it will lead to more accidents and more fatalities. Ergo, we should not increase the speed limit. This kind of scenario warrants careful study.

The slippery slopes that worry us, however, are more often tied to things closer to home, and are not always fallacies. If I smoke, my kids will see it and are more likely to start smoking themselves. If I let my temper get out of hand, I will end up hurting the people I love. Regarding temptation, if I play with fire, I will get burned, and those around me will be collaterally damaged. If I follow *every* dream, I won't be able to make a living.

Some of our slippery slope worries may be in the realm of faith matters. If I believe that the Bible is infallible, then I cannot question any part of it, or I will end up negating all of it. If I believe that the Bible is God's authoritative Word for me, then I risk my eternal salvation by not marrying multiple wives, keeping slaves, and oppressing my non-believing neighbors. If I do not do enough good deeds, I will not get into heaven.

We could name slopes in other arenas of our lives as well, but let's turn back to Psalm 121. Slippery slope concerns are always based in fear. So, too, for the psalmist when he looked to the terrors in the hills; but once he claimed God as his help, he talked no more about the worrisome hills. Rather, he talked about God as the One who stays awake so we can

rest without fear. He talked of God as our “keeper,” using the Hebrew word *shāmar*, which means “tending,” “watching over” and “taking care of.” In the Old Testament, *shāmar* is used only to describe the activity of God. Again, the implication is that because of God's care, we need not live in fear of slippery slopes or any other terror. God is with us as we go about our daily lives with all their fears and worries and slippery slopes. God is with us, the psalmist said, “from this time on and forevermore.”

We need to apply this fear-free thinking to life's slippery slopes. Many of them are just dark delusions which we can negate when we shine the light of truth upon them. Some of them are not delusions, they suggest possible real outcomes; but again, clear thinking, free from fear, is needed.

Some slopes are indeed slippery, but their incline may lead upward, toward higher ground. I imagine Jesus' opponents said slippery slope things like this: You can't absolve a crippled man's sins...who knows where that will lead? You can't heal on the Sabbath...who knows where that will lead? You can't forgive a woman with an adulterous past...who knows where that will lead? You can't heal a Gentile...who knows where that will lead? You can't sacrifice your life for others...who knows where that will lead? Jesus knew exactly where those things would lead: to God and new life. Jesus saw the upward way, the higher way that leads to God. He healed, forgave, absolved, and sacrificed because God is greater than our anxieties and our shortcomings.

The mountains in Psalm 121 are not God, but seeing the mountains helps the psalmist think about God who is the keeper Israel, the protector of the people, the One who never slumbers or goes off duty. When we find ourselves on slippery slopes, we need not fear, but instead, look for God's leading. Ask God's help to see whether there really is an incline, and whether it truly leads down or points upward to God.

Prayer: Lord, help us to lift our eyes up to you that we would look to you for help and strength. When we focus our eyes on ourselves or on our fears in this world, draw our eyes back to you. God in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

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