



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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“The LORD Surrounds his People”

Psalm 125:1-2

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Psalm 119 isn't quite long enough to cover all the Sundays after Trinity, so there are few more psalms that round out the rest of the year. Starting next week I'll be preaching on the Epistles and Gospels, but this week I'd like us to look at today's psalm—specifically verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 125.

Psalm 125 belongs to a group of psalms—from Psalm 120 through Psalm 134—called “Psalms of Ascent”. They were songs that the people sang on their way to Jerusalem for the various feasts during the year. Remember that the Jews didn't “go to church” every week like we do. They went to the temple to offer their sacrifices at specified times of the year, so you can image the whole nation converging on Jerusalem all at once—thousands of pilgrims on the roads all headed the same direction. It was one giant procession, and as they went they sang songs and these psalms are some of those songs. Look at verses 1 and 2:

**Those who trust in the LORD are like
Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but
abides forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so
the LORD surrounds his people, from this
time forth and forevermore.**

The people were headed to Mount Zion—to the mountain on which Jerusalem was built and the temple at the very top—and as they made their way there, they sang about the strength and power of God and how he gives his gracious protection to his people, likening it to the protective mountains around Jerusalem—the mountains they might have been hiking over as they sang. But brothers and sisters, God takes care of his Church now just as he did then, so this morning I'd like to consider where we, God's people, stand as we trust in the Lord.

First, because we trust in the Lord, we cannot be moved. We don't trust in ourselves or in any other part of creation. Our faith doesn't rest on anything we do. We're a “peculiar people”. We're different from the people around us who trust in themselves and in their own works. The

world teaches us that we're not so bad—even that we're pretty good—and that we deserve God's favour. They would put God's crown of salvation on their own heads. They don't think they need any help and they don't look for it. And despite the fact that the men and women of the world stand condemned, they don't know it. They're oblivious to God's standard of righteousness. At one point each one of us was stuck in that same self-deception. The problem is that without the Spirit working in our hearts, none of us can ever set aside that spiritual pride. It's only by God's power that our eyes are opened to our inability to save ourselves and that we humbly run to the cross to wholly trust in Jesus for salvation.

Again, without that grace, we are spiritually helpless. Think of St. Paul. When we first meet him in the book of Acts, he's stuck in his own self-righteousness. He thought he was in God's good graces because of his religious zeal and because he was doing all the right things. If you'd asked Paul if he thought he needed a Saviour, he would have laughed at you—or handed you over to the Sanhedrin! But on the road to Damascus, Jesus met him and opened his eyes. Paul learned that without Christ he had nothing that pleased God and that he could never earn his salvation. From that day on he knew that God justified him not by his own works of righteousness, but by his Sovereign grace and by faith in Christ. He saw that everything he had though was pleasing to God was nothing but filthy rags. Only by faith in the righteousness of Another was he delivered from the bondage and condemnation of sin. But from that day on Jesus Christ alone was at the centre of his trust and hope—he would not be moved.

But we need to remember, too, that to trust in the Lord, means that we trust him with *everything*. How can we stand unmoved if we're not fully trusting God? St. Peter tells us to cast *all* our cares on him, because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). Too many of us will trust God for the salvation of our souls, but we refuse to hand our whole lives over to him. We hold back this or that part of our life, our job, or our finances, or our family. And yet how can we trust him with our eternal souls if we won't trust him with the everyday things of life. Paul wrote, “I *know* whom I have *believed* and I am *convinced* that He *is able to guard* what I have entrusted to Him until that day” (1 Timothy 1:12). Until we trust God wholly and with our whole lives, we will never have the confidence to say that we stand unmoved like the Mount Zion—whatever we've held back from his care is always going to undermine the security he offers.

If Psalm 119 has taught us anything, it's that God's people trust God's word and the promises there. If you don't trust God's Word, you don't trust God. Peter says that God gives his people “precious and very great promises”—that he seals his promises on our hearts and minds. And even though God's promises are our inheritance, that doesn't mean that he doesn't sometimes make personal application of them to us—to test our faith. We've all experienced times when we wonder where God's promises are. In Psalm 89 we see David going before God and asking, “Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?” And in Psalm 77 he asks, “Has God forgotten to be gracious?” And yet through those times God reminds us that his promises are forever. He gave Noah the rainbow to remind him of that fact. He showed Abraham that for him to violate his covenant would be for him to cease to be God—something totally impossible. The God of yesterday is the God of today and of the future. Even when he couldn't see God's promises, David's faith drove him to proclaim, “This is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us *forever*” (Psalm 48:14).

So, brothers and sisters, even though we may face hard times, God's people “cannot be moved”. Their hearts are fixed on trusting in the Lord. Christ, their Rock is the foundation of their hope. St. Paul at one point considered all the powers of the world and even the powers of the devil and hell—amazing power—and yet in light of those powers he could still say with confidence: “For I am sure 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 enemies of the Church will never stop trying to separate us from Christ, but our faith is in Jesus' promise that no one is able to snatch us from the Father's hand and that “whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

It's not just that we, as God's people cannot be moved, but second, that we are safe—safe like Jerusalem surrounded by mountains. God's is near his Israel in every age and I'd like to look at the different ways God surrounds us.

First, he surrounds us *in his eternal purpose of grace*. St. Paul tells us in Romans 8, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...and those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified

he also glorified.” These words can give us amazing peace if we’d just consider what they mean. They remind us that God has an eternal purpose—one that he has always had and always will have—and that he has been, is, and will continue to bring it about, through the finished work of Christ on the cross and in the full redemption of us, his people. Jesus himself came into the world to ratify and bring about the promises and provisions the Father had eternally decreed for his people. You and I are living the earnest, or the down payment, of them and trust that he will bring it to completion on the Last Day.

Second, *the infinite merits and righteousness of Christ* stand between the people of God and anything that would bring us down. Before we were Christ’s we were exposed to sin and to the just wrath of the Father—to the curse of a broken law. But by grace through faith, we now stand clothed in the long robe of Christ’s righteousness. In his righteousness he shelters us from the things that would otherwise destroy us. Isaiah describes the work of the Messiah as being “like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land” (Isaiah 32:2). He’s the rock that shelters the Church. As St. Paul wrote, our “life is hidden with Christ in God.” In the Old Testament it was when the blood was sprinkled before the mercy seat that God became a refuge to his people. It was when the blood of the Paschal lamb was painted on their doorposts on the night when the angel of death was to pass over Egypt, that the safety of Israel was assured. And so Mount Calvary, where the blood of the perfect Lamb was shed, is the spiritual mountain that shelters our souls. There’s a reason why, as we read in Revelation last Sunday, the focus of our attention in heaven is on “the Lamb in the midst of the throne.” It’s because Jesus, that perfect Lamb, is the one who gives us the righteousness we can never have on our own. It is only as we are washed in his blood that we can stand before our holy and righteous God without being condemned. Again, the merits and righteousness of Christ protect.

Third, *the goodness of God surrounds his people forever*. And not just his goodness. For those who are reconciled to God there isn’t a single attribute of the Godhead that isn’t in some way working for our good. God’s attribute are like an entire mountain chain of their own, surrounding and protecting us. Paul reminds us that “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). In Psalm 85:10

David reminds us that through the death of Christ, “*steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other.*” The righteousness of God, which Psalm 36 says is “like the great mountains”, is now covered with the golden crown of God’s peace, proclaiming blessing upon all who kiss the Son. God’s *mercy* surrounds us like a shield. His *eternal being* and *unchanging nature* stand with us in terms of our everlasting salvation. He gives us assurance through the prophet, Malachi, saying, “I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.” He is the great I AM and he holds his saints in his hands. He assures us in Deuteronomy: “The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” The attributes of God and how they relate to us and our salvation could be a year’s worth of sermons, so suffice it to say that the Holy Trinity, in all his perfections surrounds his people night and day and with David we can proclaim: “I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust” (Psalm 91:2).

We also have a great High Priest surrounding us with his protection. He ascended to heaven and now makes continual intercession for us before his Father. He is the Son of God, who became incarnate for our sake, who offered himself on the cross as the payment for our sins, and is now exalted to the right hand of the Father. And the Father himself sealed Christ’s office with his own oath: “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” That statement made by the Father should give us comfort, because it gives us assurance that his prayers are heard and that none of us will die who are in his priestly care. God always hears him. When he was on earth, Jesus prayed, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). Whenever a believer dies, he goes to be with Jesus and to see his glory—to sit in the midst of the Lamb. And Jesus will continue to offer that same prayer until the last one of his people is with him in glory. I’m not sure we give it much thought, but Jesus’ intercession—his prayers for us—is the real reason behind our perseverance in the faith and our future eternal life. He said to St. Peter at one point, “Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but *I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail*” (Luke 22:31-32). The world, the flesh, and the devil all stand ready to tear away our faith, but our great High Priest surrounds us with his

priestly prayers and with the grace offered at the cross. He keeps us safe and we persevere—we are not moved—because of his priestly work on our behalf.

Fifth, we should find great comfort in knowing that *God’s presence is always with his people*. The Israelites were afraid to do the work that God had called them to do and so he reminded them: “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14). When he left his disciples to return to heaven, Jesus encouraged them, saying, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). He ascended so that he could send his Spirit, who now indwells and fills *all* his saints. Our tendency is often to get discouraged or to think he’s not with us because we’re not always conscious of his presence, but what we need to remember is that the promises of God are not dependent on how we feel. If you feel like God has somehow withdrawn his presence or his promises from you, consider what he says: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1). He says, “I will never”—and *never* means *never* for all time and for all eternity—“leave you nor forsake you.” This was the reality of David’s life that we’ve seen throughout Psalm 119: God was always with him, even when David didn’t feel it. When the Israelite were at the Red Sea and saw no hope, God was still with them. When Nebuchadnezzar threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fiery furnace, God was with them. When the young man was with Elisha and saw their enemies and was afraid, God’s prophet prayed that his eyes would be opened so that he would see the army of the Lord that surrounded them—God was with them. Brothers and sisters, whatever troubles we face in life, God is here for us. He says, “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10). And he will do just that, because he is with us *always*.

Sixth, God is around us *in all his promises*—not just in terms of his presence being with us, but in *all* his promises. Think of the devastation that Noah saw as everything around him was destroyed by a flood. Consider how unsettling that was. Sure, God had saved him, but you can imagine he was probably wondering if it would happen again the next time God became angry with the human race. And so God established a covenant with Noah—and not just Noah, but with all of us who have come since then—not to destroy the earth as he did in Noah’s

day. And God has been true to that promise, because it's his character to be faithful. He said through Isaiah, "'This is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,' says the LORD, who has compassion on you" (Isaiah 54:9-11). Friends, those words of promise should give us comfort. God keeps his promises and they surround us like the mountains around Jerusalem. We can say with the Psalmist in another one of these "psalms of ascent", "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth."

Finally, God surrounds his people *as he works out his providential will*. This is an amazing truth to meditate on—to spend time thinking on all the implications of the fact that God's providential will is to preserve his people. This is what David had in mind when he wrote: "You have given the command to save me" (Psalm 71:3). Nothing works against the welfare of God's Church. We may be tossed around on a stormy sea, but everything in the end is used by God for our good, and history teaches us that the Church always comes out of trials and tribulations stronger and more faithful. We can speak of God's attributes as the great mountains that surround and protect us, but we can also talk about the little hills, that because of God's righteousness, do the same for us. Everything, big and small, is used by God to keep us safe and preserve his children. Think of the story of Esther, where we see in God's providence even the little things that seem so inconsequential having major parts to play in the salvation of his people. In that story it starts small. The king couldn't sleep, so he asked one of his servants to read him from the palace transcripts. In God's providence, it was just the right book. The servant opened it to just the right page and at just the right time. And because of something so small, the enemies of God's Church were brought down and God's people were saved. To quote from Isaiah again, God says, "No weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD and their vindication from me, declares the LORD." There are all sorts of things working against us, but we can take comfort in the knowledge that God is in control and that he directs everything for the good of his people.

Let me finish by going back to where we started and ask: Are you solid and immovable like Mount Zion because of your faith? Do you rest secure knowing that the Lord surrounds you like the mountains surrounding Jerusalem? The Psalm reminds us not only of the reality of the Christian life, but of the peace and security we should feel even when the world, the flesh, and the devil are doing their worst to destroy our security. The loving and protective hand of God is a wonderful place to be, but there's only one way to get there and it's trust in him and in his promises.

Someone emailed me a video clip yesterday. It was a compilation of answers given to a man who wandered around a Christian booksellers' convention asking people what the Gospel is. You'd think that if anywhere, at a Christian booksellers' convention you'd get mostly right answers to that question. In fact, out of sixty people this man only got one right answer. He got all sorts of answers about earning our way to heaven by our good works. He got lots of answers about health and wealth and all sorts of other nonsense. But only one person out of sixty told him that the Gospel message is that *Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to earth and died the death that you and I deserve for our sins, so that we might be forgiven as we put our trust in his sacrifice and make him our Lord*. One in sixty! Everyone wants God's blessings. Everyone wants the security he offers. And lots of different people have all sorts of different ideas about how to get it. Brothers and sisters, the Scriptures tell us that there's only one way to come to God, only one way to find redemption, only one way to receive eternal life, and that's to humbly admit that we are sinners and put our whole trust in Jesus Christ and his death for us on the cross.

And, friends, once we've done that, we can live with security. Jesus warns us that the enemy will attack. Scriptures teaches us that we live in a fallen world. Pain and death are still very much realities of life. But those of us in Christ know that there is more to existence than this life. Jesus gives us an eternal perspective. We know that this life is only a short time of preparation for eternity in his presence. And as we trust in the promise of the Gospel, we also trust in his promises of love and care for his Church. And as his Church, experiencing his faithfulness we can say with those ancient Israelites on their way to the temple:

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.

Please pray with me: Almighty God and Father, thank you that when we put our whole trust in your Son, Jesus Christ, and in his death on the cross for our sins, we can rest secure in your promise of life—unmoved and unmovable like Mount Zion. Thank you that you surround us with your gracious hands that we might persevere to the end. Give us the grace to trust, not in ourselves or anything we might do, but in your Gospel promises and to see your hands at work around us that we might be always giving you praise. We ask this in through Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen.