



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
1200 Marquette Avenue  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
(612) 332-3421  
[www.westminstermpls.org](http://www.westminstermpls.org)

## *From Where Does My Help Come?*

Tim Hart-Andersen

Sunday, June 2, 2019

*Psalm 121; I Kings 17:1-7*

We don't know much about the ancient prophet Elijah the Tishbite, but he's one of the most fascinating characters in the drama that unfolds in the pages of the Hebrew Bible.

Elijah appears abruptly on the scene during the reign of King Ahab, sometime in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Ahab mistreats his people, including his own family, and turns them away from the God of Israel. They begin to worship Baal, a local deity associated with the weather, the rain and fertility. Scripture says Ahab is not only a bad king, he is the worst king ever in the land, and the God of Israel is not happy about Ahab.

The prophet Elijah – apparently on an errand from an angry God – suddenly pops up in Ahab's story to stand alone against the king. Elijah confronts Ahab about false worship and then calls drought down upon them all. "As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand," Elijah declares to the king, "There

shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” (I Kings 17:1)

The prophet’s announcement challenges not only the king, but the very deity the people worship. Baal represents the fertile life that comes from rain falling on the earth; by threatening drought Elijah attacks the very *idea* of the existence of their god. If the rain stops, Baal will be exposed as a false god.

Further into the story Elijah, the lone prophet of the God of Israel, goes up against 450 prophets of Baal in a fiery scene. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. For today we simply want to consider the first encounter of Elijah with King Ahab, and, especially, what happens next.

In confronting Ahab, Elijah tells the truth, stands up for his faith, keeps his principles, refuses to yield, and provokes the king – and for that, the prophet immediately has to flee for his life. God tells Ahab to go deep into the wilderness on the far side of the Jordan, to a river valley, a wadi, called Wadi Cherith.

It’s the only place he’ll be safe from powerful King Ahab, but to stay in the wadi puts Elijah into another kind of danger: he’ll die of hunger. There’s nothing there to eat in that desert wilderness. Full of fear in that desolate place, deep in a valley shadowed by death, the prophet looks up anxiously and with the psalmist of old, must have asked, “I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?” (Psalm 121:1)

And that's when the ravens appear. In one of those strange yet wonderful stories of scripture, the truth-telling prophet survives the wilderness desolation thanks to the arrival of the big black birds. Morning and evening those corvids find him and bring him food. The scene is reminiscent of the Israelites wandering in another desert in another time. When *they* have no food, God supplies sustenance in the form of *manna*, and the people survive. *This is the God of life, after all, and whatever it takes, God will provide.*

*God provides.* "My help comes from the LORD," the psalmist says, "Who made heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:2)

In historic England it was common for a group of ravens to congregate in the upper reaches of the Tower of London. They seemed to be guarding it, or keeping watch over it, and people began referring to the ravens as "a constable." To this day a flock of ravens is called *a constable* in England.

*I look to the hills – from where will my help come?* For Elijah, it was from a *constable* of ravens, fluttering down to find him in the valley below to give him food.

Why Ravens? They're the first birds mentioned in scripture. Noah sent a raven out from the Ark, to look for dry land. We all remember the dove, but first it was a raven, and it must have found land because it never returned. Ravens are smart; why go back to the boat?

Jesus spoke about ravens, as well, confirming their intelligence and reversing the flow of the provision of food: “Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them.” (Luke 12:24)

In the story of Elijah and in the words of Jesus, ravens represent the reminder that God never abandons us, never leaves us, no matter how dire our situation may be. *God provides. God protects. God is present.*

“The Lord will not let your foot be moved,” the psalmist says. “God who keeps you will not slumber. The One who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” (Psalm 121:3-4)

Psalm 121 is what we might call a *hinge-psalm*; it speaks to us at a juncture in life, a point when we pause to look back even as we step into an unknown future. We can imagine Elijah reciting the psalm in the wilderness, echoing off the walls of the wadi, not sure of what lies ahead, wondering from where help will come. Not sure what the next chapter in his life will bring.

It's also a *reminder-psalm*; the Hebrew poet wants us to remember that we've not made it this far on the journey through life merely on our own. *We've had help.* Elijah knew that.

Psalm 121 is a Baccalaureate Sunday-kind of psalm, and Elijah and the ravens story offer good biblical accounts for those waiting and watching for what happens next, hoping that God – *or someone* – will provide. You graduates are crossing a threshold

and entering a new chapter. For some of you the next step is clear; others are waiting and watching. Wherever we are on this journey, let us not forget that we've not made it to this point all by ourselves. *We've had help along the way.*

I remember Miss Labrose, my second grade teacher at Cossitt Avenue School in LaGrange, Illinois, outside Chicago. I was a transfer student, joining the class well into the school year. We had moved to the big city the previous year from small-town Kansas, and everything was new and rather terrifying to me, as a shy seven-year old.

I arrived at my new school mid-morning one day and class was already underway. I was so scared of the classroom filled with kids I didn't know I refused to go in. I stood in the hall and cried and cried, totally afraid to enter the room. The more I cried the more petrified of the idea I became. That school hall became a kind of wilderness wadi for me. Six decades later I can still remember how frightened I was.

The teacher, Miss Labrose, a tiny, dark-haired immigrant woman, who spoke with an accent and who may have experienced something of what I was going through in her own life, came out into the hall, into my wadi. The principal went in to take the class. Miss Labrose put her arm around me and listened to me wailing and heard about all my fears and took all the time I needed, and then comforted me and hugged me and rather smothered me with care and concern. She calmed me down.

She was my raven, coming to rescue me. She was in total solidarity with me, letting me have my fear, letting me do what what I needed to go, but making it clear we were going to get through this together. I finally faced my dread and went into that classroom and started second grade, knowing that at least the teacher was on my side. In the coming year Miss Labrose would introduce me to the joy of reading and doing creative projects and unleashing the imagination.

*I had help, and I made it.*

I imagine most of you graduates had a Miss Labrose somewhere in your school years, a teacher who took special interest in you and helped you through a tough time.

We have all had help along the way, haven't we? And not only from teachers; sometimes from friends and family – and even from unexpected strangers. Or maybe even from something out of God's good creation. On a day when we celebrate educational achievement, it's good to remember that *we are not alone*. We pause and look back and see how support has been there when we've needed it – maybe not *always*, or perhaps not in the way we had hoped, but in hindsight, if we look closely, we can see the movement of something larger than ourselves in our lives.

*From where does my help come?*

We Presbyterians call it the hand of Providence. *Providence*. Ours is a God in whom we can trust, a God who will not abandon us. *Bidden or not bidden*, the old Celtic saying goes, *God is present*. When life overwhelms – and doesn't it do that often these days – and it's hard to find a way forward and our spiritual life is parched and hungry, *God provides*. If we're open to it and watching for it, God provides.

“The LORD is your keeper,” the Hebrew poet says.

“The LORD is your shade at your right hand.  
The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
The LORD will keep you from all evil;  
God will keep your life.” (Psalm 121:5-7)

It's been a while since I've mentioned el Camino de Santiago. Baccalaureate Sunday seems a good time to tell another story about our walk a few years ago across Spain...Late on the second day of the 500-mile pilgrimage we were coming down out of the mountains. It was raining. We were cold and tired and sore and blistered. Darkness was descending and we had no lodging for the night. All the places we checked were full of other pilgrims.

We were soaked and getting concerned and wandering around the town center not knowing what to do, when all of a sudden an older woman rounded a corner and greeted us. She stopped and took a look at us, apparently it was clear we had a need. She was like a raven from the local constable, watching over us. She was

Miss Labrose, come to find us. "Por favor," she said, "Vengan a mi casa y quedense conmigo esta noche."

Please, she said, come to my house, and stay there.

*From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. And all the creatures that live therein.*

The psalmist speaks with such confidence, such assurance. No matter the circumstances, "The LORD will keep your life...The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in" - and if you have to do it again - "your going out and your coming in, from this time on and forevermore." (Psalm 121:8)

The old Hebrew poet is telling us *to count on that promise*, to trust that God will provide as we find our way into what lies ahead.

And meanwhile, Elijah might add, *keep watch for the ravens*.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.