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 Texts: Exodus 19: 3-6; Psalm 121; Matthew 15: 29-31
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Unbow Your Head

One of the trickier moments in ministry – at least for me – occurs just about this time every year. After some time away, it comes time to step back into the pulpit and, having fallen out of practice, to say something worth hearing. Momentum takes over after a bit, but the dead stop, followed by the cold start, has been a challenge year by year. After all, it's not as though time has stopped around here – plenty has happened in your lives. Not only that, there are things happening in the world that should probably be addressed. But so too, I also feel a desire to share with you something of what's been on my mind over the past several weeks, as a result of traveling, reading, and all the rest. And so what follows will be a kind of slalom, woven in and around the Psalm we heard earlier, where the poet memorably says, "I lift up mine eyes to the hills."

And so let me begin by telling you a story. Last month our family spent a week visiting friends in the mountains of Colorado, and the morning after our arrival, I went on a trail run with one of those friends. It was one of those moments that makes you glad to be alive. The trail was rocky, and roots would occasionally protrude from trees growing alongside the trail. In order to keep from falling, my eyes were fixed downward, constantly scanning the ground for the next footfall. Meanwhile, we were surrounded on all sides by mountain peaks ranging anywhere from 12-14,000 feet in height. The beauty was jaw dropping – if only I could see it! For the most part, I didn't. My attention was absorbed by my feet, making sure, of necessity, that I didn't go sprawling in the dust. It was only after my friend and I had stopped that I really took the measure of all that splendor, and it took my breath away.

That's a fairly accurate representation of what the last year and a half has felt like, at least to me: moving, sometimes very quickly, across a landscape scattered with obstacles. It's been necessary to cast our eyes downward, toward the ground, lest we make a colossal misstep. You know what I'm talking about: every aspect of our lives has required several additional steps, to say nothing of additional scrutiny, in order to stay healthy. Every outing, every gathering, every errand was freighted with the burden of decision, and of preparation. Do we get together with those friends? Under what conditions? Do we dine in a restaurant? Do we eat indoors or outdoors? Do we send the kids to school? If so, what are the arrangements for getting them there and home, and on and on. For our church, too, this year and a half has been a constant process of scanning the ground before us for roots and rocks that would cause us to stumble. We have, quite rightly, kept our eyes on the ground ahead of us, and you know what? We've done well. I'm proud of how well we've done! For the most part, we haven't stumbled and we haven't fallen, and for that we can be grateful.

But there comes a time when we must look up, in order to see the landscape around us, in order to achieve a wider vision, in order to sense the splendor that is, in fact, all around us. Many students returned to school earlier this week, and many teachers and administrators did as well.

We'll soon launch our fall activities around here, and it won't be long before we all have our eyes on the ground once again, busily, hurriedly, trying to keep our feet steady as we move along. It will, most surely, be another year where roots and rocks may trip us if we're not careful. Which is why, like on that morning run in Colorado, it's worth considering the Psalmist's words in Psalm 121: "I lift up mine eyes." Specifically, I'd like to suggest three domains in which we might lift up our eyes, the better to see what is around us. But before I do, I wish to spend a few minutes reflecting on the meaning and context of those words from Psalm 121, "I lift up mine eyes to the hills."

Psalm 121 is the second of fifteen poems or songs in the Psalter known as the Psalms of Ascent, said to be recited or sung on holy days as travelers climbed the hills leading to Jerusalem. For those of you who have traveled to Jerusalem will recall that it requires a climb to get there – its ancient sacred sites were built on high ground. The instinct, shared in the Bible and the Sierra Club alike, is that the mountains, or the hills, are where you go to encounter God. It's not an accident, after all, that when the covenant is made between the wandering Israelites and Yahweh, it occurs on a mountain. Why, we might ask, didn't that event take place in a canyon, or a cave, or a valley? Why the heights? So too, when Jesus delivers the most famous sermon ever delivered, known to posterity as the Sermon on the – where? – the Mount, we can ask why he ascended a mountain before delivering his address, rather than offering it elsewhere. Why not the sermon in the village, or the sermon in the city, or the sermon at the sea? Why do the Bible and modern outdoor enthusiasts alike insist upon the mountains for divine revelation or spiritual experience?

To be clear, I don't think you're any less likely to encounter God in a dense urban setting than you are likely to encounter God on a mountaintop. I don't think you're more likely to encounter God in a desert, or less likely to encounter God in a rural village. They all pose possibilities and limitations alike as sites for spiritual knowledge. Still, I do think there is wisdom to be gleaned from the admonition to lift up one's eyes to the hills as we scan the horizon for help. Perhaps that's because the heights, toward which we lift our eyes, are a way of gaining a panoptic perspective, a visionary overview that prevents us from getting turned around, or lost, or mired in empty routines. So too, when faced with challenges, or crises, we require the ability to rise above the situation, to some degree anyway, if we are to keep our bearings. I'm reminded of a scene in *Moby-Dick* in which the smoke from burning whale oil clouds the vision of the crew, a symbol of the great crisis they, and the American Republic, are shortly about to suffer. As an antidote, Ishmael offers these words: "There is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces." When we are turned around, in other words, or going through a spiritual or moral crisis, we need something within us that can soar, thereby restoring, or helping to maintain, our equanimity, our calm, our judgment, and perspective. Is that not, after all, something of what it means to be borne up upon eagle's wings, as Isaiah has it? Is that not what it means to lift up our eyes to the hills? Sinai, the Mount of Beatitudes, the high places – they help to remind us of who we are, and whose we are, when we're trudging through the valley, when our eyes are cast down at our feet, when we're just picking our way from moment to moment. The Psalmist, and much of the biblical tradition, reminds us of the importance of looking up every now and then.

When we do, it can affect our personal lives, and our relationships. This is the first domain where the Psalmist's wisdom can help us. Many of us have been living in tight quarters with our spouses and families for a long while now, and it's brought certain long standing emotional patterns to the surface. An old friend stopped by our house last week, and confided how the pandemic had driven a wedge between he and his spouse, so that little tics and tremors in their relationship all of a sudden began hemorrhaging, such that they'll likely separate soon. They became locked in a relational cycle that they couldn't find their way out of, until it was too late. That happens with spouses sometimes. It happens between parents and children. Sometimes it happens with friends. It can happen in a congregation too. If we're not careful, relational cycles can confine and trap us, preventing us from seeing other possibilities that are right in front of us. Like the fact that, even the annoyances that arise in long term relationships, there's a love and affection that continues to bind us. That even when we disappoint one another, as we invariably do, there is a pathway toward healing, and forgiveness, and reconciliation that is available to us if we want it. Sometimes, it's necessary to raise our heads, to lift up our eyes to the hills, so to speak, if we are to find that perspective in our relationships. Speaking personally, hearing our friend's story made me enormously sad. But it was also the occasion to raise my eyes, and to realize how much I love and value my own spouse, and my own family. It also caused me to realize how much that's true about you as well, my family of faith. Sometimes, it's good to look up and recognize the goodness in what we have. I want you to hear that I recognize the goodness of you, and of this community. I want you to hear how thankful I am for it. I hope we all lift up our eyes from time to time, and recognize what we have together.

Here's another way it can be helpful to lift up our eyes: in our relationship with our very own selves. Even as some of us have spent way more time with our families or loved ones, many of us have spent a whole lot more time alone this past year and a half. Which has meant that we're often more attuned to memories, and to past lives than we might otherwise be. Failures, mistakes, regrets, disappointments – I think for many of us these have been closer to the surface than we wish they were. If we're lonely, something inside whispers that that's on us, the result of some kind of character flaw. If we feel stuck in our lives, some inner voice tells us that perhaps we failed to make the right choices earlier when we had the chance. God forbid, if the anger or criticism of another is focused upon us, we imagine that it must be deserved. Of course, it's often true that we do bear some – *some!* – responsibility in our life situations, but it's also true that those limiting, accusing, and doubting inner voices are rarely telling the whole truth of who we are. To lift up our eyes, in this sense, would be to acknowledge that while those inner voices may be telling us something we need to hear, there is a wider, more panoptic perspective on our lives that is given to us by God. And that is this: that you are loved, no matter what. That you are valuable, no matter what others may say. That you are infinitely interesting, whether others can see it or not. That you are worthy of care, of tenderness, of grace, whether you think you deserve it or not. To lift up our eyes to the hills is to sense a wider perspective on ourselves. It is to be presented with a key that unlocks a different door in our ability to render, and to receive, acceptance.

Maybe it will help to tell another story. It's a scene from a film called *If Beale Street Could Talk*, which is based on a James Baldwin novel of the same name. In it, a young woman confesses to her family – her mother and father, as well as her sister – that she is pregnant with her boyfriend's child. She is too young to be pregnant, and the relationship does not feel fully

secure. The girl is deeply ashamed to share the news with her family, and she is scared. Her head is down, and her eyes are scanning the floor as she speaks, refusing to meet the eyes of her parents, and her sister. She is bracing for their consternation. As viewers, we too brace ourselves for the anger and recrimination – or even just the weary resignation – that may follow, but in Baldwin’s story, something different, something that is wonderful, happens. The girl’s sister, who sits receiving the news, senses her sibling’s profound discomfort and shame, and she issues a forceful command: “Unbow your head, sister,” is what she says. What she means is, “Be not ashamed. Be not afraid. Yours is a situation born of love, and it is in love, not in anger and not in shame that we shall meet it. Even if hardships shall come, we shall greet them with our strength, with our unity, and above all, with our love for one another.” Those words, “Unbow your head, sister” create an opening that the rest of the family chooses to walk through, greeting the situation with eyes and heads unbowed, proud and confident, rather than cowed and ashamed. That’s what it means to lift up our eyes – sensing the grace all around us, and the alternate possibilities that grace engenders.

If that’s true in our relationships, if that’s true in the deepest core of our personhood, I also think it might have implications for the crisis we’ve witnessed in Afghanistan. There’s so much pain in what has transpired – in Afghanistan certainly, but in America as well. We’ve been confronted with our own failure as a country, to foresee what would happen when we departed from that place, but also to build something of value, something that would endure in that country. Years, and lives, and capital investments, have all vanished, nearly overnight, and there has been no shortage of criticism and blame to go with it. Unless I’m mistaken, that’s a response born out of pain, a very understandable pain. I get it. I can only imagine what our veterans are feeling as they watch this unfold. Even so, that cycle of blame and recrimination is akin to gazing at our feet, refusing to unbow our heads. What might happen if we looked up? What might happen if we raised our eyes to the hills? What sorts of new perspectives might emerge?

For starters, we might begin to sense a long standing, and problematic, relational pattern that the United States has exhibited toward other, smaller, countries, namely, that with enough time and money and military training, we can remake those places in our own image, or at least, an image conducive to our interests. In the 20th century alone, that has happened in Nicaragua, in Haiti, in the Dominican Republic, in Cuba, in Vietnam, in Grenada and then in the 21st century in Iraq and Afghanistan – to name only a few. Some of those occupations have been brief, and some have been long. But they have each generated powerful and long-standing resentments, and far worse, that it has taken decades to overcome. Perhaps the Psalmist’s words have a bearing on this situation as well. Perhaps it is time to unbow our heads, to lift up our eyes, and to try something different.

For example, maybe raising our eyes to the hills, in this context, means resolving that before we begin another such occupation, we commit ourselves to providing life-saving vaccines to the world, the Covid vaccine foremost among those. What if it meant supplying poor countries around the world with medicines, with health interventions, with emergency food aid, and with technologies that could avert millions of deaths each year in the struggle against disease, climate disasters, and famine? We spend unimaginable sums on weapons of war, but relatively little on humanitarian aid. And friends, the poor all around the world, those that Frantz Fanon called the wretched of the earth, know it. It’s little wonder that there is so much anger out there directed

our way. It's not the whole of who we are, it's true, and not all of that anger is deserved. But much of it is.

What if we used this moment to lift up our eyes to the hills, and to implement even a few of those gestures? I suspect that, not unlike in other relationships, a whole new set of possibilities would suddenly be unlocked, possibilities that would generate life rather than greater and still more death. No doubt there are a few among us, and perhaps many more than that, who think such a suggestion is pious nonsense. If it is, I can only say that it's Christian nonsense, and as Christians we must reckon with it. Such it is toward which our faith directs us.

There's more to say, of course. But the gift of returning after a long time away is the realization that there shall be some 30 or 40 Sundays in the coming year to say it. During that time, I like many of you, shall likely have my head down, watching each step that I take. We shall need to watch our steps. But let us also covenant to unbow our heads from time to time and to lift up our eyes, in order to behold the hills from whence our help comes. It comes from the Lord, who gives us strength for the journey. Amen.