

The late Steve Hayner, former President of Columbia Seminary, told a story of the time he attended a national conference on theology and the environment.

They were put in small groups – he told us he wasn’t a name-dropper, BUT his small group consisted of Vice President Al Gore, a lady who was the President of the National Council of Churches, Jim Wallis (editor of Sojourners magazine, an evangelical social ministry magazine), and Carl Sagan, the astronomer.

They had a worship service and then went back to their small groups. Carl Sagan made the comment that he didn’t really understand the worship service and all that was going on with it.

Steve said that at that, Vice-President Gore and the President of the National Council of Churches began to witness to him. After a few moments, Carl Sagan said, “It’s been a long time since I’ve been around people like you.”

Al Gore said, “You mean, religious people?”

“No,” said the secular scientist, “people who care for my soul.”

But that’s not the end of the story. Dr. Hayner went on to say that soon after that, Carl Sagan was diagnosed with cancer.

He was at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle. Near the end of his life, he made the comment, “The believers were the only ones who walked with me all the way.”

The point is not whether Carl Sagan was converted.

It’s about all of us who sing this song of Psalm 121, ‘who look to the mountains – and wonder and worry and wait – ‘where does our help come from?’

Psalm 121 is one of a group of psalms called "psalms of ascents," Psalm 120 through 134.

They are so named because they probably were sung as pilgrims ascended the mountains on their journey to Jerusalem for the feast days.

Remember how we’re told in the gospels that Jesus and his family would travel to Jerusalem; imagine Mary and Joseph and Jesus singing this song, “He will not let your foot be moved, he who keeps you will not slumber.”

Maybe they sang it for worship as they climbed the steps up to the temple, as a reminder of the mountains like Sinai and Hebron, where God was present.

Eugene Peterson affirms this ancient liturgy for us pilgrims in real life in his translation of this psalm as he writes, “No, our help doesn’t come from the mountains; our help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.”

It’s the psalm of God’s passion for us believers who can enter Carl Sagan’s cancerous world and stay with him, and all like him, all the way, a present help as he made his final journey.

It’s the song for us believers who see the suffering in the world, who are looking to the hills and see the dangers of the journey – ambushes by bandits in the mountains, a stumble on a steep mountain trail, the heat of the desert sun, and all the other unforeseeable risks.

What’s remarkable is that this psalm does not bemoan the fact of all the bad that might happen.

No, it is a song of God’s constant protection of those who travel the path, for us believers who see deep into the souls to be cared for as we make the journey together.

It is a song that celebrates the faith as Paul put it, if you will, same tune, different verse – nothing

can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

...you see, the journey the psalm really speaks to is not so much a journey of geography from here to there, but a journey of the geography of the soul – of who you are and those we love.

It is the real journey in our world, as Anatole France said, “The truth is that life is delicious and horrible, charming and bitter.”

The questions are not about whether it happens – it does – It’s not a matter of protecting us from the evil or preventing the evil from happening – we all walk that path.

This psalm is the foundation of that part of the Lord’s Prayer, “...deliver us from evil”; not that evil will never get to us, that we’re in some sort of protective bubble of belief,

Our deliverance, our protection is in the remembrance of our dependence on God’s grace and the utter reliability of God’s promise.

I like the way Oswald Chambers puts it: “God is present now, dancing on the chaos of my life.”

We do not walk by ourselves, no matter what the old hymn says, we do not walk that valley by ourselves

God protects us with hope because hope is what people needed then along the journey.

Sometimes we modern people are impatient with these ancient hopes. *Don't they know that you can't just call on God and automatically get everything you want? How naive could they be?*

But I think the psalmist knew very well how uncertain life was, and didn't imagine that they could bring about a favorable outcome every time, in every situation.

The late Reverend John Claypool wrote a remarkable book several years ago called “The Footsteps of a Fellow Struggler” and in that book

he tells the story of his eight-year old daughter, Laura Lue.

After a valiant struggle with leukemia, she died. He wondered how he was going to make it. “How could I ever stand in the pulpit again?” he wrote.

But two weeks after her death, he did stand in his pulpit and this is part of what he said: *“Where I am this morning, sad, broken-hearted, still bearing in my spirit the wounds of death, I confess to you that I have no wings with which to fly, or even any legs on which to run.*

*But by the grace of God, I am still on my feet. I have not exploded into anger, nor have I keeled over into the paralysis of despair.*

*I am hanging in there, enduring with patience what I cannot change but have to bear. That may not sound like much to you, but it is the most needed gift of all.*

*Patience and endurance and courage to walk and not faint. Today I am here to give thanks to God for that.”*

Did you catch what he said, “The most needed gift of all”?

We are protected from losing hope.

God is always with us and the divine passion is always bigger than, stronger than the circumstances surrounding us.

Hope in God's grace lifts us when we fall, strengthens us in times of weakness, quiets our trembling hearts, and gives redemptive meaning to our efforts.

God knows how we are easily frightened by events over which we have no control. God sees inside of us and how terribly confused we are by a world that makes so little sense at times.

Yes, on this journey we look to the mountains and see the hellish nature of racism, our

addiction to materialism, and the tsunami of violence as much as anyone else.

Hope in God's grace gives us strength to love bruised, battered, and oppressed people who are sitting at the tables in our world – who have no trust in anyone, people who have lost all hope, whose comfort has been assaulted by the cruelties of this world, by rapid change, by the fading away of old certainties...

In this time today, and throughout this season of Lent, and in the days beyond, let it be said of us, by those whose lives are held captive by those evils swarming down the mountainsides of their lives, that we are not defeated and will not cringe in fear or give in to hate and hostility and lies.

When we live in the power of God's grace with that kind of hope we have enough love to take risks, make sacrifices and travel through those mountains, down those roads together.

We do not ask for popularity or success or fame, but simply that our lives may be the source of comfort, hope, and trust for other people.

Yes, life is often bigger than we are.

It is never bigger than the God who made us and is passionate to help us meet every challenge.

God knows us for what we are, yet will not let go of us, and gives us a promise for what we ourselves might be as we make our ascent.

‘We look to the mountains’ and we sing of God our help as we climb above our doubts and fears and failures to reach the peace and joy of the clear, shining light of God’s presence and protection.

We are pilgrims of God’s passionate purpose as we step into the future with confidence, those believers who care for the soul of the world.

And God’s promise of protection is the power of hope that gives us the wisdom, strength, stamina and courage we need to keep climbing, accepting

every opportunity to make ourselves and the world around us better.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.