

June 7, 2026

Paul Purdue preaching

Do you believe that God created imagination? Do you believe that God gives you songs, dreams and inspiration? Do you believe that God speaks from the experiences of your life, as God spoke through the experiences of our spiritual ancestors like Abraham, Sara, Paul or Silas? Jesus invites us to our imaginations: *Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them... Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.* Look at those birds. Hear their songs. See the beauty. What might you learn from them? Be amazed at a field of wildflowers. Imagine how God cares for you.

So would you imagine yourself living in Galilee a little over 2,000 years ago? You might work as a baker, carpenter, fisher, farmer, potter, shipwright, mason, merchant, musician, physician, jeweler, blacksmith, teamster, tanner, tent-maker, tax-collector, accountant, lawyer, civil servant, scribe, soldier, weaver, or winemaker. No matter your profession, you are likely a master gardner as dinner usually comes from your garden. You likely eat healthier. You are fit because you walk everywhere you go. You are used to the heat! Each week the Sabbath arrives like an amazing blessing because everyone stops working and comes together!

Three times each year, you keep the Pilgrim Festivals: Passover, Shavuot and Tabernacles. You walk to Jerusalem with all your neighbors meeting new friends along the way. There are no earbuds, portable speakers or radios but you have plenty of music. You know Psalms 120-134, the Psalms Of Accent, by heart and you blend your voice with the other pilgrims traveling upwards to the Temple.

I lift up my eyes to the hills—

from where will my help come?

My help comes from the Lord,

who made heaven and earth.

God will not let your foot slip;

God who keeps you will not slumber.

God who keeps Israel

will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your keeper;

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.
 The Lord will keep
 your going out and your coming in
 from this time on and for evermore.

You have made this trip 3 times a year since as early as you can remember. You hike down from the Mount of Olives and then up towards the Temple. King Solomon's Temple and David's Palace sit on 35 perfectly acre engineered courtyards. Huge 70 foot limestone retaining walls uphold the Temple Mount to this day. The first time you first saw the Temple, it took your breath away. It still does. You would have to travel to Babylon, Egypt or Rome to see anyplace that rivaled the architecture and gardens in the Temple.

It will be a week of feasting. You will enjoy beloved dishes like your Aunt Zelda's babka. The Temple worship is probably better than the worship in your home synagogue with choirs, professional cantors, horns, strings, flutes, tambourines, drums, cymbals, and castanets. There will be dancing and feasting. You will blend your with pilgrims from every nation under heaven: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Romans, Greeks, Babylonians, Arabs, Immigrants, orphans and widows. Caesar may rule the world, but for one week it feels like everyone has come home.

Scholars tell us it is hard to translate meter, rhyme, idiom, alliteration, repetition and rhyme, but there is a step- step- step repetition in the original Hebrew. There is a kind of march candance.

God who keeps
 God who keeps you. God never sleeps
 The Lord is your keeper;
 The Lord will keep you
 The Lord will keep your journey forever

How does your experience affect your interpretation of Scripture? Do we experience Psalm 121 differently from the air conditioned comfort of our sanctuary than those pilgrims felt walking uphill in June? Do we read the Bible with an eye to the experiences that shaped the verses?

Several years ago Connie and I hiked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. That's the easy part, the hard part is hiking out: 10 miles and 4300 feet of elevation gain. Connie kept repeating a line from "Finding Nemo", where Dory says "Just keep swimming, Just

keep swimming, Just take one more step”. How would it feel to hike for days and days and then see the last rise to the Temple Mount?

God will not let your foot slip;
The sun shall not strike you,
The Lord will keep you from all evil

As the sun beats down on you, you have been walking for days. Does your pilgrim experience re-write the song for you? Do you hear its bold claims differently? Do you decide you do not need sunscreen, sunglasses, or a hat because the Lord is your holy parasol? Do you remember how you tripped on that root somewhere around Bethlehem and think your faith may not be pure enough? How do you keep moving amid life’s heartache and distress if you believe “*the Lord will keep you from all evil*”? Do you feel ashamed or judged for experiencing evil?

Our collection of hymns does not offer writers notes or a thoughtful deconstruction of the Psalm. However, the unknown editors often put two very different Psalms right next to each other. Why would they do this? They did not tell us. Maybe they did this to stretch our imaginations? Let’s hear from Psalm 120, the first Pilgrimage song.

In my distress I cry to the Lord,

‘Deliver me, Lord. from lying lips and deceitful tongues.

Woe is me, that I am an immigrant...

Too long have I had to dwell among those who hate peace.

I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.

Psalm 120’ “*In my distress, I cry... woe is me*” is different from Psalm 121 “*The Lord will keep you from all evil... the Lord will keep your feet from slipping off the path*”. What do we do with these contradictions? Do we ignore one of these truths? Or do we need both songs? Could both songs be true? I worry that when we just look at one verse we miss the sweep of the Gospel. Maybe we need to sing all the songs? Maybe we need to consider all of Jesus’ words, before we declare that “the Bible says....”. Maybe even our songs and experiences from walking through a field of flowers or through the valley of death shape or marching to the capital informs how we understand Scripture, because God cares about our experiences and God is still with us. God is not sleeping.

In the Preface to “*A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists (1780)*” John Wesley wrote that he “*doubted that there was any religious community in the world that had more song books than the Methodists*” We are at our best a singing people. Art, music, and poetry changes and heals us. Wesley described our need for both “*a spirit of poetry and a spirit of piety.*” A pious spirit reminds us to value reverence,

worship, awe and practising faith. A spirit of poetry makes room for mystery, liberates us from literalism, and reminds us that God is always doing new things. What if we read the Bible with a spirit of poetry? God is bigger than all the chapters and verses> If you allow Psalm 120 about “Distressing Woes, lying tongues and people who love war” and then you sing Psalm 121 about how God “is keeping us from slipping off the path... how God keeps us from evil” you may come up with something like our choir anthem this morning

Lord, I will lift mine eyes to the hills
 Knowing my help is coming from You
 Your peace You give me
 In time of the storm
 You are the source of my strength
 You are the strength of my life
 I lift my hands in total praise to You
 (Total Praise- by Richard Smallwood)

No matter what is going on, no matter who is Emperor, no matter who sits on the throne, no matter what is going down in the world, we can say, “God is our keeper, we will not slip or fall”. So even if the sun is not shining or it is baking us alive, we can know God is our strength and our shade and we will preserve because God is with us. That is a message more than any one verse or song.

What if we put these seemingly divergent songs together

I lift up my eyes, Where does my help come from?

My help comes from the Lord- my keeper.

In my distress I cry to the Lord--

The Lord keeps your foot from slipping

‘Deliver me, Lord. from lying lips--

The Lord is your shade right now- right beside you

Woe is me, for I am an immigrant--

But my help comes from the Lord, who created me!

Too long have I dwell among those who hate peace--

God is not sleeping, God is not slumbering

I am for peace; they are for war--

The Lord will keep you in your coming and going,

The Lord will keep you forevermore

We are always so quick to explain, so quick to judge, but music and poetry speaks another language. Science tells us that music and singing expands the neuroplasticity of our brains, actually re-writing the way our brains think. Music creates more holistic and integrated brain pathways. (Neural plasticity: music-based interventions by Chaterjee, Hegde, & Thaut)

Let us be open to all the songs. Be open to the song God is writing in you. Sing the songs of lament, the songs of joy, the songs of presence. Remember, there are songs of abandonment: Jesus prays one on the cross: "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" We need all these songs. Remember God is calling to us from a field of wildflowers and as a raven flies over us, as we march to the capital or navigate the valley of the shadow of death. God is with us as we sing "woe is me", and when we rejoice "this is the day that the Lord has made"! God is in all of those songs. So dear friends keep on swimming, keep on walking, keep on singing, because the Lord will be with you now and forevermore. Amen.