

O God... whose glory is always to have mercy
Be gracious to all who have gone astray...

God does amazing things.
But some of God's greatest work is not visible...
the work God does... *inside* us.

The author of Psalm 121 needed help
His life wasn't working...
He couldn't do it on his own...
He didn't have the resources... and he knew it...
So he prayed...

***I lift up my eyes to the hills;
from where is my help to come?***

The writer is undoubtedly an important figure... a leader.
And at the top of his game... he admits... to himself... and to God...
I can't handle life by myself... It's too much... I need help.

And so he cries

***I lift up my eyes to the hills;
from where is my help to come?***

And the answer comes from the writer's own voice.

My help comes from the Lord.

Have you come to that point in your life?
recognizing that you can't do life all alone...
that you need help beyond yourself.
You need someone or something bigger than you are.

***I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?
My helps comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth***

An agricultural school in Iowa ran a study.
What does it take to raise 100 bushels of corn from one acre of land?
In addition to the farmer's labor...
The harvest required:
4,000,000 pounds of water,
6,800 pounds of oxygen,
5,200 pounds of carbon
160 pounds of nitrogen
25 pounds of potassium
75 pounds of yellow sulfur
and other elements too numerous to list.
Plus... rain and sunshine at the right time.
Their conclusion?
Only 5 per cent of the yield could be attributed to human efforts.

There are lots of things that we *can* accomplish
Lots of stuff we're *capable* of doing

But sooner or later... we all come to a point
Where we just. can't. do. it.
We reach out to one another...
But sometimes... human help just isn't enough.
Like the Psalmist we cry out

*I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?
My helps comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth*

But the psalmist isn't the only one struggling in today's readings

We meet Nicodemus in the Gospel lesson...

Now Nicodemus was a leader... a Pharisee...
a member of the Sanhedrin.

His life was immersed in a rigid view of God.
gripped by centuries of tradition...

precise... demanding... observance of faith...

He was *the* theologian... *the* teacher... with *all* the answers...

Educated. Wealth. Powerful.

Respected and admired... this was Nicodemus.

But it wasn't enough.

He wanted more... and had no idea how to get it...

This pillar of faith... discovered... he was wrong.

Then he heard about a new voice in the Land...

So, he snuck out in the middle of the night...

And found this Jesus...

But he wasn't alone.

He brought along his baggage. His history, His tradition, His belief

So, when Jesus said...

No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

Everything he believed... Everything he stood for...

Was called into question.

Nicodemus knew that Jesus revealing something very important

But he just didn't get it.

And so... much like us... when called into question...

We lash out... We dig in... We stop listening...

And this Holy Man didn't respond with love...
No. He answered... with ***Criticism... Sarcastic Criticism...***

How can anyone... who's already born and grown up...
Be born again?
You can't ***re-enter*** your mother's womb and be ***born again***.

Sarcasm spoken with a ***critical*** voice...

Criticism the ***Second C***

In ***The Sneak Attack of the 5 C's***

Those negative thoughts
That infiltrate our minds... destroy our peace...
expand our anxiety... and lock our hearts...

The definition of Criticism is on the back cover of your bulletin

Criticism is the ***expression of disapproval***
of someone... or something...
based on ***perceived*** faults or mistakes.

Criticizing hurts your spirit
by creating a toxic inner atmosphere
of negativity, bitterness, and insecurity
that erodes self-worth and joy.

It fosters a judgmental, defensive, and fear-based mindset, hindering
personal growth and separating you
from God and others.

Persistent criticism can act as emotional abuse,
destroying self-esteem and creating feelings of inadequacy.

And it is ***pervasive*** in our society. ***It's everywhere!***

Denunciation... objection... aspersion... disparagement...
faultfinding... flak... pan... slam... swipe... and vitriol...

You can't turn on a TV without some expert telling you...

You know what your problem is?
Then follow with a torrent of blame.

And our brains perceive criticism as a threat to survival
triggering emotional responses that override logical thinking.

When persistent... it strains relationships...
and contributes to long-term anxiety... depression...
and diminished self-worth.

So where does this vitriol come from?

People criticize others so they can feel better about themselves...
or...
To cover up their own feelings of inadequacy.

Sometimes it's a defense mechanism to protect self-image
or...
To avoid confronting their own shortcomings.

It's used to diminish another person's success, appearance, or skills.

Some use criticism to assert power... influence... control...

But when you hear it... *Remember...*
If it's not about love... It's not from God!

A large corporation was losing market share and profits.
So, the Board of Directors fired the CEO and hired a *fixer*

The new guy went through the entire organization
Identified the problems... and lists... and ordered corrections

After six months... things were worse... not better.
So, the Board fired the *fixer*... and hired another guy

The first thing *he* did was have all the lists sent to him.
Then he locked them in a drawer.

Then he issued a company-wide directive...
You may not be critical of any other employee in the company.
If you do you... the first time you will be given a formal warning
The second time your employment will be terminated.
This applies to ALL personnel.

And they fired some people.

After six months, the company turned the corner.
Market share was improving and profits were up.
The drawer full of lists was opened...
And every problem had been resolved.

The fixer created a Culture of Criticism
His successor... a Culture of Encouragement

It's true of churches as well...

When Ernie Bennett was Canon to Bishop Howe

He got the first call when disaster struck.

Clergy Infidelity... embezzlement... all the worst stuff...

I said to him...

This has to be the worst job ever.

Every time your phone rings it's terrible news

He said...

True.

But it's not nearly as destructive

as the critical voices of the congregation

after the event

So how do we push back against criticism...

First of all... Recognize it for what it is...

One person's *perception*

Not law. Not fact. Not truth. Just noise

When you hear it... *Remember...*

If it's not about love... It's not from God!

And if it's more than you can handle... *Remember...*

You are born again... in Christ and thru Christ

You are born again... in Christ and thru Christ

More than saying the right prayers

or professing the right statement of faith

being born from above is about a way of life.

It's about living so people will see you and know about Jesus.

For Nicodemus, being born from above happened slowly.
He came to Jesus under the cover of night.
He wasn't quite sure he believed just yet.
He didn't want anyone to recognize him.

Then, after he left Jesus, he returned to the Jewish establishment.
His conversion didn't come with a bolt of lightning or sudden blindness

There's no incredible dream that upends Nicodemus's.
But deep down, and ever so slightly, something began to turn.

His rebirth began under the cover of darkness
when he took a chance on Jesus.
He was an uncertain... fly-by-night... wanna-be disciple.

And, with one exception, we never hear from Nicodemus again...
until the end of John's Gospel.

When Nicodemus's birth from above is laid bare.

As Jesus hung crucified,
after all of the other disciples fled from fear of persecution
Nicodemus stood at the foot of the cross
armed with myrrh and aloes and the other provisions for burial
ready to bear the broken and lifeless body of Jesus to the grave.

As he watched the life depart from Jesus
And he knew what he must do

I wonder if he prayed Psalm 121

*I lift up my eyes to the hills,
from where is my help to come?
My help is in the name of the Lord."*

As he stood there, terrified that he too would be taken and crucified
I wonder if he prayed Psalm 121

***He will not let your foot be moved
and he who watches over you will not fall asleep.***

As the carried one hundred pounds of aloes and herbs

I wonder if was comforted by Psalm 121

***Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel *
shall neither slumber nor sleep;
The Lord himself watches over you; *
the Lord is your shade at your right hand,
So that the sun shall not strike you by day, *
nor the moon by night.***

I wonder if on that impossible day
He prayed Psalm 121

***The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; *
it is he who shall keep you safe.***

And I wonder if when it was all over
He prayed Psalm 121

***The Lord shall watch over your going out and your coming in, *
from this time forth for evermore.***

I know I do.

When I am faced with an impossible situation

I remember Psalm 121

When called to do something I am totally incapable of accomplishing

I remember Psalm 121

Admitting that I do not have the stuff to live my life

As I know God wants me to live it

Only increases my reliance on God

When we realize that ministry... relationships... service... prayer...

All of life

Is like that acre of corn

That requires just 5% of human effort to reach a bountiful harvest

Then there is hope.

For me... for you... for all of us...

And I cannot survive without it.