



SHIELD OF FAITH

"Take Up the Shield of Faith" - Paul

Thursday August 15, 2019

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. — Psalm 121:1

The Hills

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My dad gave me a wonderful gift. He obtained a college degree in forestry. He took mom, my brother and me camping frequently. He purchased a small, affordable, pull-behind camper that we used in my formative years. He fashioned a large wooden box into which he built compartments for the orderly storage and use of kitchen implements.

This creative dedication to family adventures left a lasting impression on me. Dad gave me a love for the hills.

What are the hills? They aren't right here in the place with which I'm familiar. The hills mask the horizon. The hills aren't the end. There is something beyond them. Someone ... God ... is beyond them in some way. The Psalmist says in our verse this morning that help comes from over there.

He tells us we must lift up our eyes to the hills. We must *not* maintain a parochial gaze if we expect help. We will see God's help coming if we look to the hills.

I love mountains. I have loved them since my childhood. I pursued hiking as a young man, going to the mountains as often as other commitments allowed. I climbed all of the trails up Mt. Katahdin, Maine's highest mountain. I led my sons up the mountain. I tried to lead my wife up the Cathedral Trail on our honeymoon. That didn't go so well. You'll have to ask her to tell you that story.

I'll never forget one time standing atop Mt. Katahdin gazing to the horizon. It seemed there was nothing to block the view because my perch was high above everything that stood around it. It was a God moment for me. He felt close. His creation ... His presence ... filled me. He is real, I thought. He made all of this.

Paul the Apostle writes in his letter to the Romans, "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse."

When we look to the hills we encounter "the invisible things of him." Hebrews teaches us the definition of faith. It is the substance of things hoped for, the essence of things not seen. Faith has the attributes of the invisible. It dwells in the hills.

Continued on the back

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The devil loves screens. He must. The only hills we see are the ones presented to us by Microsoft when our computer fires up. They're beautiful and majestic. But they're virtual. They aren't real. They're pixels.

A friend told me yesterday that his grandson's football team may not continue. There aren't enough boys to make a team. Horizons of an essential masculine kind are seen by boys playing competitive sports. No longer. Competitive games on a screen are replacing the gritty rough and tumble on a grassy diamond and hundred yard field. Yesterday, I heard about an internet based competitive video game that has 20 million players.

I don't think virtual competition and pixeled mountains replace God's hills. I don't see His help coming from that direction. If the Psalmist were among us he'd be telling us to lift our eyes off our screens. Screens require a downward gaze. God is on high. He isn't down low. That's the devil's domain. God is light and life. He is natural light, not the electrified man-made glow of charged and flowing atoms. Death will more readily be found by a local gaze than by an upward appeal to heaven.

A couple weeks ago I started jogging again. Back in 2016 I trained for nearly a year to run the U.S. Marine Marathon with my middle son. I loved the training, and the Marathon. The older I get the more I find that progress means pain. Finding virtue is all about pushing or denying. A friend is finishing a fast that lasted a dozen days. God is real. He meets us at the horizons of our existence.

It's always easier to gaze at what's familiar, what's nearby. We make ourselves better when we lift up our eyes ... when we look at something new and unfamiliar, but real.

My morning jog carries me down Main Street, Mt Airy and then off in disparate directions in town depending on my mood. I relish the feel of the air, the fleeting scenes of human enterprise, and off in the distance the dramatic fall of the Blue Ridge to the undulating hills surrounding Andy Griffith's birthplace. Some mornings it's hard to lift up my eyes to the jog. I'm learning those are the days when it's most important to lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help.

I set my mind to slumber last night watching a YouTube about Rudyard Kipling's life. He lived through a lot of tragedy and hardship. He kept his gaze high, and achieved literary greatness. He was the youngest man to receive the Nobel Prize in literature. The following verse from his poem "If" no doubt contributed.

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,

Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,

If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,

If all men count with you, but none too much;

If you can fill the unforgiving minute

With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,

And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

Amen.