

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I spent most of the summer of 2000 at a little village in a remote part of the Cascade Mountains of eastern Washington state accessible only by boat. The village was a Christian retreat center, and there were no phones and no computers. I was there for 12 weeks. I had thought it might be a fairly idyllic place to live, but I quickly realized that there were two sorts of people who were at the center. The first type of person was there for a retreat for one or two weeks. These people came to the mountains to find peace, solace, and God. The second kind of person at the retreat center were people like me—there for the whole summer and working for their room and board. Some of my friends worked in the kitchens, and others worked digging ditches, cutting trail, farming, and maintaining the village. I spent the summer running a day camp for Jr. High and High School students—so while their parents were off during the day finding God, I was watching their children.

After a long and quite tiring summer of watching other people's children from 9-5 every day, I was ready for a break. And so, on the last week of our time in the village, my two best friends and I decided to pack up our tents and go on an adventure. We had heard that there was a spectacular hike up to a lake that several of our coworkers had taken earlier in the summer. And so, being young and fit and a little bit naive, we decided to attempt the hike.

And hike we did. Hour by hour we hiked up a mountain after having been assured that there was a lake at the top of the trail. We walked and walked and walked. The trail never quite seemed to end. After about six hours, we legitimately started to think that we were lost. To pass the time, we started telling each other childhood stories and even played some word games. We were hot, sticky, and covered in bug bites. And, we were seriously starting to think that we had made a very bad decision to hike so far.

And then, like a miracle, we rounded a bend and found ourselves at the mountain's summit. And right there, in front of us, was an alpine lake straight out of central casting. It looked like a lake should look if it was on a postcard. They don't make lakes more beautiful than this one.

We walked down to the shore, and, much to our surprise, there were two men sitting there. We hadn't seen any sign of human habitation for the whole day, and it seemed strange to see them in front of us. How had they beaten us up the mountain? On further inspection, we saw that the two men had a float plane and had flown up the mountain for a day of fishing. They saw that we were exhausted and, after making pleasant conversation, gave us the remains of their cooler. I tell you that to this day a beer has never tasted so good. It was like the Platonic ideal of a beer. Sitting

there, on a rock, on top of a mountain, drinking a beer that appeared as if by a miracle remains one of the finest moments in my life. We drank a toast to our benefactors as they flew off in their little float plane, thinking about how lucky we were to be alive.

I know that the gospel story about the widow and the judge is pretty interesting, but today I wanted to talk about the psalm because it is one of my favorites. Over the years I have come to think that there is no situation in life where Psalm 121 does not apply. It's as good at a birth as it is at a funeral. After all, who doesn't cast their eyes skyward for help now and again.

I think of God's mountaintop help a bit like that unexpected and perfect beer. Sitting there, being refreshed, after all the trials and tribulations of the day. Having God there for solace and comfort must feel a little like putting your feet in a mountain lake after having hiked all day. I think it was Benjamin Franklin who said that beer is proof that God exists.

But the older I get, the more I think that the help that comes from God isn't just at the end of the journey. When I look back on that day, my friends and I gave one another support every step of the way. We shared stories and watched out for bears when someone had to use nature's restroom. We make a fierce little community of three, even when we worried that we were lost, even when we were tired, or sore, or out of our depth. The more I reflect on my life, the more I think that God was not waiting for me at the end of the trail. Rather, I think that God was there for me at every step up the mountain. "I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where is my help to come? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth."--says the Psalm.

It has been my experience that the Christian life is not one without struggle. In fact, it seems to me that people of all religions and none seem to struggle at similar rates. But what I appreciate about the Christian expression of faith is the sure belief that when we walk, we never do it alone. We walk alongside a benevolent God, and we walk alongside each other. I know that we're sitting here in the middle of Wisconsin, but we are also walking side by side, supporting one another on the trail even when it is hard or scary or uncertain. Perhaps especially when it is hard or scary or uncertain. St. Mark's, you have been given to one another for joy, of course. But you have also been given to one another as helpmates. You may very well be the help that someone else in this community needs today. You might be the face of God. That might sound a little grand, but I happen to think it is true.

God will be your help at the of the trail, of course. But I think the real grace is that God is walking alongside you every step of the way. Amen.