

DATE: June 14, 2026

TEXT: Psalm 121

THEME: God guides us as we go through life.

SUBJECT: Journeying, Providence

TITLE: The Circles Turn

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: What can we rely on through the journey of life?

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

In chapter 64, the *Tao Te Ching* says, “A journey of a thousand miles starts under one’s feet (or with a single step)” (Chapter 64). What’s the farthest distance you’ve ever walked? Rarely do we hear about - much less experience ourselves - long journeys by foot. One of my heroes, though, was a woman named Peace Pilgrim who, in the final 30 years of her life, walked across the U.S. nearly seven times while carrying nothing but the clothes on her back, a comb, a toothbrush and some correspondence. I’ll probably tell you more about her sometime.

Modern travel has allowed us to experience the world as no human had prior to the 20th century. Journeys by foot marked watershed moments in human history: Abraham and Sarah wandered from the region of Aram, in what is now Syria, to the land of Canaan - a distance of about 500-700 miles, depending on whether you take the fertile route or the desert route. It may have taken Sarah and Abraham years to walk that far. That’s approximately the distance from here to San Francisco. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land. As the crow flies, this is no more than 380 miles — from here to Mt. Shasta. There were no gas stations to ask for directions back

then, however, (and GPS was still in the embryonic stage) so they ended up wandering around for 40 years and travelled an unknown distance. The Apostle Paul may have been the hands-down winner of the ancient long-distance walking contest. In 14 years, he covered an estimated 9,150 miles; but he cheated because he took boats for much of the way.

Bobby Morris, an adjunct faculty at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, says, "One of the most common Hebrew verbs in the Old Testament is the one for "going, walking." Psalm 121 is one of 15 psalms that are all about walking. Psalms 120 - 134 are called Psalms of Ascents, possibly because Israelite worshippers sung them as they made their way up to Jerusalem from lower regions like Jericho. That particular route was known to be fraught with peril. There was little water along the way, and being attacked by robbers was an ever-present concern. So, while Psalm 121 was sung as people walked up the side of a mountain, the purpose of its lyrics were to give comfort to those who sung them as they exposed themselves to danger along the way. In fact, the Hebrew word for "keep" appears six times in the psalm's eight verses. It's translated 5 out of 6 times as "watch over" - as in "The Lord watches over you."

Clearly, this was a prayer to God, sung in the hope that God would protect the singing traveler from danger along their way.

Journeys come in many varieties — physical, spiritual, emotional, chronological, relational. Most are similarly fraught and none are easy. While Psalm 121 once offered comfort to those who were travelling from one place to another, it can just as well be sung today by someone who is going through a divorce or one who is growing older and faces the end of life. This is a song/psalm about life itself, really, a journey marked by

feet that slip, suns that burn and moons that hold mystery - maybe even apprehension. The psalmist sings of certainty that God will protect, will “watch over”, the traveller. But I wonder if there might have been doubt behind all that big talk about being certain. I tend to be wary of people who speak in absolutes, who view uncertainty as a liability. God has given us limited knowledge and limited insight and it seems only natural that uncertainty and doubt are part of the design. One of the key tenets of Buddhism is that all things in life are impermanent; we try to attach ourselves to things that are constantly changing and this leads to stress and suffering. The Judeo-Christian tradition offers something to attach to, however. It’s nothing in this world — not jobs, not money, not success, neither beauty nor strength, not even the relationships with those around us. The psalmist identifies this “something” simply as “the Lord.” The Apostle Paul, in the book of Romans, identifies it as “the love of God” (Romans 8:38-39). Though we slip and stumble through this journey called life and experience spiritual, emotional, chronological and relational uncertainty, the psalmist and Paul seek to assure us that “neither death nor life, neither angels nor heavenly rulers, neither the present nor the future, nor any power, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” I appreciate Buddhist thinking for its honesty, courage and unapologetic gaze into the eyes of uncertainty, but I’m not a Buddhist. I could certainly be wrong, but I do hold that there is solid ground — or rather, solid grounding — in life. I call it “God” and I believe God attends my conscious self in my uncertainty, my stumbling, my slumber and my sleep; I believe God preserves life and watches over my coming and my going both now and forevermore.

This journey we're on: it's a wild ride! From birth to first walking to speaking in full sentences to riding a bike to graduation to finding kindred spirits to share the journey to middle age to retirement to finding meaning beyond work to aging and to eventual death, the psalmist tries to assure us that the Lord will watch over us. We may walk a straight line at times and in circles at others, but I believe that we will never walk so far as to be outside of God's loving, caring, guiding, watchful presence.

Perhaps music alone does keep us here. Either that or love. Maybe they're different expressions of the same reality.

Let's pray: God, we know we understand so little, but the psalmist guides us to one certainty: that you are love and that love endures through all the challenges, joys, hopes and struggles of life. As we live and move and have our being, let us have it in you, trusting that you are watching over us, and perhaps singing to us. May we have ears to hear your song. Amen.