

From the Ends of the Earth
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
Feb. 4, 2018 PM Sermon
Rev. Peter Jonker
Psalm 61

There are two aspects of this Psalm that lead us to think that David could have written it. First you have the little heading at the front of the Psalm (called the superscription) which says “of David.” That’s a clue that David might be behind it, although it is not certain proof. In the original Hebrew, the preposition translated “of” can also mean “to” or “for” so, even though we have historically attributed all the “of David” Psalms to David, we can’t be completely sure about that. This Psalm however has one more clue that points to the possibility that David was behind it: in verses 6 and 7 you hear a prayer for the king, and it’s very easy to believe that the person making the plea is probably the king himself, and it’s very easy to believe that the king in question is David. Let’s read the Psalm now, and let’s assume that it’s David writing. As we read, try to imagine what sort of situation David is in as he writes. Let’s imagine what sort of thing is happening in his life that makes him write these words.

Read Psalm 61. So, what sort of life situation do you imagine David in as he wrote this? You probably weren’t imagining one of David’s triumphant moments. It’s safe to say that Psalm 61 was probably not written after David conquered Goliath. It was probably not written after he won a great victory over the Philistines. This is not the psalm of a person on top of the world; this is a psalm of a man in trouble.

In fact our tradition has imagined that David wrote this Psalm in one of the darkest seasons of his life, when he was running from Absalom his son. Maybe some of you who know David’s story well, even thought of that specific situation when you imagined where he was. That’s what John Calvin guesses. In his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin writes: *“It is not exactly ascertained at what time this psalm was composed; but there seems to be some probability in the conjecture, that David had been for a considerable period in possession of the throne before he fell into the circumstances of distress which are here mentioned. I agree with those who refer it to the time of the conspiracy of Absalom.”* That would fit. Because when his son Absalom tried to take over the throne, David fled from Jerusalem, many of his friends abandoned him, he was mocked and jeered; in other words, he was in a place of fear and weakness, he was in the sort of place where someone might say, “Hear my cry O God! Listen to my prayer! Let me find refuge in the shelter of your wings!”

But of course it could have been another situation. I can imagine David writing this Psalm in a time of serious illness. I can imagine David feeling as though his life was under threat from disease and praying “Lord, prolong the life of your King!” I can imagine David praying this psalm when his infant son was dying, and he went into seclusion praying that the boy might recover. I can imagine all sorts of different life situations that David might have been in, but truthfully the only thing we can say for certain is that David prayed this Psalm “from the end of the earth.” “From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint,” cries the Psalmist.

Where is the end of the earth? Is it a physical place? It could be. In Deuteronomy and in a few other places in the Bible the phrase “the end of the earth” is used to describe the place of exile. If Israel is unfaithful, says the Lord in Deuteronomy 28: *“The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand,⁵⁰ a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young,”* and this nation will take you into exile. When the people of Jerusalem were dragged off to Babylon, they cried ‘from the end of the earth.’ But I think that ultimately the end of the earth is more than a physical place. The end of the earth is any place where you are out of options. The end of the earth is any place where you’ve tried everything and you simply don’t know what to do anymore. The end of the earth is the place where human power is no good anymore. The prisoner locked in his cell. Living 23 hours a day in a world of cinder blocks and fluorescent light, seeing the sun for maybe an hour a day; that prisoner is at the end of

the earth. The rich businessman driving down the road in his new Mercedes: he's admired and envied by people all around him, he gets invited to dinners with congressmen and senators, but he can't talk to his son. His son is lost in a far country of drugs and anger and he can't reach him. Everyone around him tells him what a great guy he is, but he feels like a failure. He looks like he's on the top of the world, but he's at the end of the earth. The respected elder is loved by all the church members. He visits the shut-ins in his district who all say what a wonderful Christian man he is, but he has a secret porn addiction that fills him with shame. He has told himself a thousand times to stop, he has screamed at himself, but somehow he keeps going back. That man is at the end of the earth. The Christian school teacher who can't stop drinking; the frazzled mother who feels like she's this close to hitting her kids; the professor who can't stop the panic attacks; all these people are at the end of the earth. The end of the earth is anywhere where human power is no good anymore; it's where we're out of options, out of money, out of ideas, out of strength; it's where our heart is faint and we just can't do it anymore. You don't need to be taken far away from home to get to the end of the earth, you can be in that place in your own living room, in your own kitchen in your own bed. At one time or another, all of us here have been to the end of the earth. Some of you are there right now.

We have stories that we like to tell our children that purport to give them guidance in their times of trouble, stories like "*The Little Engine that Could*." All of us heard that story at some point growing up. The little engine has to take the train over the mountain and the mountain pass is very high. The little train sees the steep grade and wonders if she can ever get over, but the plucky little train gives it a try and the whole way up the hill she chug – chug – chugs, and says to herself, "I think I can! I think I can!" And sure enough, by power of will and perseverance she reaches the hilltop, and she crests the hill and races down into the green valley below she says I knew I could! I knew I could!" The little engine that could is a great little story and it has a real purpose in the lives of our kids. If your child is a little discouraged as they're learning to read, 'the little engine that could' is the perfect story to tell her. If your child is learning to hit a t-ball, 'the little engine that could' is just right for the occasion. But if you are at the end of the earth, I'm not sure that 'the little engine that could' is appropriate. **When you are at the end of the earth, you need Psalm 61.** When you are out of options and your strength is done; when you've tried everything and you simply can't get over the hill, you need Psalm 61: Psalm 61 is sort of the opposite of 'The Little Engine that Could,' Psalm 61 does not say "I think I can." Psalm 61 says, "I know I can't! I know I can't! I don't know where to turn! My heart is faint! Lead me to the rock that is higher than I! Shelter me under your wings! Have mercy upon me!" We need Psalm 61 because it tells us the deep truth of our life. We are weak creatures, and we need help. We cannot secure ourselves with our own strength; we need something stronger outside ourselves to hold. If you're in a boat, you can't throw your anchor on your own deck; you have to be anchored in something bigger and stronger outside yourself. You can't blow the wind in your own sails to make yourself go, the wind has to come from outside the boat. In the words of the Psalm, we need a rock that is higher than we are. A rock that is higher than **I**, says the Psalm. "I" just isn't a tall enough letter. We try to pretend it is. We draw the vertical pronoun up to its full height, we make it stand up straight, we dress it up nicely, we pamper it and care for it. But it's a thin little pronoun. It's tippy. The wind blows and it topples right over. "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I." We cannot hold up ourselves. We need someone to save us. We need the higher rock.

Does Psalm 61 get answered? David cries from the end of the earth for help – does help come? In David's life I think the answer has to be yes. In every terrible situation of his life, in every dead end, God helps the king. Whenever David finds himself at the end of the earth, God helps him to stand up and get over the mountain. But from our perspective the prayer of Psalm 61 gets answered in a more profound way. From our perspective, God does more than lead us to the rock that is higher than we are; in Jesus the rock comes to us. We come to a dead end and we cry out from the end of the earth, and Jesus, our rock, descends to us. In Jesus the rock that is higher than we are becomes the rock beside us, God with us. And when Jesus comes to earth, he goes to all the end of the earth places! He goes to those hopelessly lost in sin – the prostitutes and the thieves – and he sits down to eat with them. He goes to the leper colony to be with the untouchables. He walks out to those who are sure their little boat is going to be swamped by

storms and calms the sea. He goes to the place of torture. He goes to the place of abandonment. He goes to the place of doubt and fear. He finally goes all the way down into the cold, windowless place of death. Just about any 'end of the earth' place you can think of, just about any 'end of the earth' place you have ever been, Jesus has been there. In fact, Jesus has been there and back again. So Jesus the rock doesn't just come beside us in these 'end of the earth' places; he gets underneath us and he lifts us up and he carries us home.

Jesus still shows up in the 'end of the earth' places. Years ago I heard this story from a church elder who went to an 'end of the earth' place. An older member of the congregation was dying. He was in a hospice situation, and in his last days, when this church member was no longer communicative, we set up bedside vigils for this person. We didn't want this person to be alone at the end of their life. One of the persons who agreed to spend a night at the side of this dying person was the elder of the church. This elder admitted that he was not looking forward to the evening. Spending the night with a dying person is no one's idea of fun. It sounds like an exhausting and frightening business. But duty is a powerful motivator so the elder went. At first he turned on the TV in the hospice room; maybe he'd watch a game while he waited. But after a while that didn't seem right, so he turned the TV off and he started paying attention to the dying man. Even though the man was past talking, he spoke to him, he prayed with him, he read some scripture. By the time the sun came up the next morning, said the elder, "I had experienced one of the most powerful, one of the most holy nights of my life. The power and presence of God in that place was overwhelming." That elder was at the end of the earth. He was in the place where "I think I can" doesn't work anymore. He was in the place where Psalm 61 is all that we have. And God was in that place. God was there with them at the end of the earth. I hope that testimony gives you confidence for when maybe it's your turn to sit at someone's bedside. I hope that testimony gives you confidence when it's your turn to lie in the bed. I hope that you will see that God is with all of us at the end of the earth and when it's our turn to go beyond that, to fall off the end of the earth, he's with us there too.

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