

Sunday, March 20, 2011: Psalm 121; Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Faith, birth, vocation: our readings offer us profound, intimidating terms for thinking about what it means to be in relationship with God.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [March 8, 2011](#) issue

Head out on a tour of the castles of medieval Europe and you'll quickly catch on to a castle's three key features. What you see first is the bailey—a large area surrounded by a substantial wall where most of the population lived and most of the life of the community was conducted. Then, in one section of the expansive enclosure, like an egg yolk sunny-side up in the "white" of the bailey, lies the motte, a mound of earth raised significantly higher than the rest of the castle. On top of the mound lies the keep, a large vertical structure, sometimes cylindrical, sometimes square.

Dictionary.com offers no fewer than 39 meanings of the word *keep*, from "tend" to "hold" to "maintain." None are dramatic or glamorous; all are prosaic and unpretentious, but also sturdy, reliable, trustworthy and durable. *Keep* means permanence. *Keep* means unswerving loyalty. *Keep* means provision and care and protection.

We all know the psalm that says, "The Lord is my shepherd." We've all entered the imaginative world of a sheep on the Judaeian hillside—stupid but loved, shuffling into a pen and being led by still waters. But Psalm 121 has a different picture. In eight verses it repeats the same message over and over again. "He who keeps you . . . The Lord will keep you. . . . The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in." Six times in eight verses. Maybe the psalm is trying to tell us something.

Together the other three scriptural readings offer a picture of our relationship with God. In Romans, with Paul, we are given the gift of *faith*. This is accessible to everyone, in a way that the law is accessible only to Jews. Faith is a gift to people of every nation, and those who are given this gift are reckoned as righteous before

God. In John, with Nicodemus, we are given new *birth*. This is a birth from above, a birth of the Spirit. It is a wholesale transformation, as traumatic and significant an event as our birth as newborn babies. Nicodemus leaves us in no doubt: friendship with God costs no less than everything and leaves no part of body, mind or spirit undisturbed. In Genesis, with Abraham, we discover that companionship with God means *vocation*—a calling that is always and everywhere bound up with the calling of a whole people. The reason we are blessed is so that we might be a blessing to others.

Faith, birth, vocation: these three powerful and profound terms teach us to think about what it means to be in relationship with God. But somehow they are also intimidating.

As a pastor for 20 years I've met very few people whose faith was all that they'd like it to be—and the exceptions to that rule have seldom been attractive ones. The wheat of our faith is mixed with the weeds of our intellectual doubts and our moral failures; our heart is inhibited by a divided head and discredited by a fragile body.

Meanwhile, birth is a place of strife. Abortion still antagonizes and deafens the faithful so that they don't hear one another. Childlessness is no less troubling to contemporary couples than it was to Sarah or Elizabeth and their significant others, and "born again" has changed from being a questionable translation to a slogan of social, cultural and political dogmatism.

Then there's calling. The organization in which I serve runs an extensive vocational discernment program that reaches hundreds of undergraduates each year. But 20 yards away at the divinity school, we don't bother to address the needs of those pursuing degrees; we assume that once one is at divinity school, the vocational question is in the bag. Not so. More and more students in these programs are as confused about their calling as the undergraduates are. Divinity school is becoming a place to *find* a vocation, not to *pursue* one.

So even these reassuring characterizations of godliness can be elusive, and that brings us back to the good news of Psalm 121. The Lord is your keeper. It's not that you have to strain every sinew to believe all these things. It's not that you have to have an immaculate and visceral religious experience. It's not that you have to be following this noble and flourishing career or pursuing that self-abnegating and admirable vocation. It's not about what you're thinking, feeling, doing. It's about God. God's got you tucked away in the most precious, most defended, most durable,

most precious, most trustworthy place. God is cherishing and upholding you and squeezing you tight. You can't change that. You may not think, feel or do all the right things, but how God regards you isn't up to you. As far as God is concerned, you are the heart of it all—for keeps.