William Oliver Elder
Psalm 121

We gather to celebrate Billy Elder's life. He enjoyed life and the world God had created. For Billy, life was a reason to celebrate with joy and laughter. He found a reason for rejoicing in the simple pleasures of God's world, in loving people, and in taking time to keep the issues of life in perspective.

Billy was born in the family house eighty-nine years ago. He lived his whole life in this same house. Apart from nights in the hospital, he was only away from home for about one week. He loved home and his home-cooked meals. Rather than eating out, he would take a biscuit and chicken to town with him.

Billy was a man who loved life. He loved to laugh and enjoy the world that God had created. The outdoors was home to Billy, where he knew the birds, fished, and hunted. There wasn’t much that could keep Billy from fishing. One rainy Easter Monday morning, folks commented that this would be one day that Billy would not go fishing. Then they saw him hit the trail with fishing pole in tow.

Billy loved a good joke, even when the joke was on himself. He had an infectious laugh and a special sense of humor. His enjoyment of life spilled over as he shared his inner joy with others. Asked what he wanted to eat at the hospital, he once asked for squirrel gravy. He joked with the hospital staff, as well as family and visitors.

Billy loved his buttermilk. He enjoyed making stew. His great nieces and nephews recall Billy stirring the stew and allowing each to have a turn with the stirring, inviting them into his life. He was a strong man and liked to play with the children. He had a zest for life and was full of fun.

Billy was a storyteller, sitting at the end of his sofa, spinning tales about the old times. He reminisced about the old times, but he was always up-to-date on current events. Going into the hospital this last weekend, he commented on the raging hostilities between Israel and Lebanon, wishing people could simply learn to get along.

Billy was active in his church. For many years he served as a deacon. He also loved to sing. A new couple once sat behind him and tried to help him by opening a hymnal for him, but he wouldn't take it. Only later did they realize that he knew the words to all the hymns by heart. Billy loved his church and was always concerned when things were not going well. He wanted people to live in harmony and enjoy God's blessings as he himself enjoyed them.

In the seventh grade, arthritis kept him from walking as far as the bus stop, so he was forced to end his formal education. He continued educating himself, however.
As an adult he kept up with world events and learning about the world God had created. He learned the ways of gardening, flowers, farming, katydids, and ladybugs. He learned to love life and not to take himself too seriously.

For Frank and Barry, at least, Billy took Winfred's place as the male figure in the family after his brother passed away. He read his Bible and tried to live it the best he knew. In the evenings, he would sit before the fireplace and read the Bible to family gathered around him. Psalm 121 that we read was one of his favorite passages.

The psalmist looked around at a world filled with trouble. He looked at oppression or enemies and yet proclaimed hope. This hope was a present strength to make it through the moments of difficulty. It was also a yearning for a future rescue that had yet to become reality.

This psalm was a summary statement of Billy's faith. He looked around at the world and troubles of various kinds. He was plainly aware of difficulties, distress, disagreements, and the various concerns of daily living. He was aware of conflicts at home, at church, and around the world, as well. While he recognized trouble, heartache, conflict, and the problems of getting along with one another, he did not despair. He looked beyond all the ills of human society and looked to God for redemption.

Billy trusted God too much to allow himself to plunge into despair with the troubles surrounding him. They grieved him, but did not lead him to despair. As the psalmist, he trusted for redemption and release in the very God who created the world from the heavens to the earth. Billy's hope and faith were secure in God. Because of God's faithfulness, Billy could laugh at his own troubles and foibles, refusing to take himself too seriously. Rather, he took his confidence in God more seriously.

Many years back, Billy had a vivid dream of heaven. As far as he was concerned, he had been present in heaven during the span of the dream. He awoke to this world of suffering that he knew too well, feeling as though he had been cheated. In recent weeks, he still relayed the story of that dream and his desire to return to that reality he had experienced for that short instant.

In the meantime, he did not despair, but he hoped for the day when his dream would become reality. He longed for the day when he might lift up his eyes and no longer see the hills, but the face of God. He was confident that when the time was right, God would finally take him to heaven forever.

Billy loved to laugh. As we grieve the hole left in our lives with his passing, we must also pause to consider his joy at finally living the full reality of what once was but a dream and a future hope. We grieve for our loss, yet rejoice in Billy's gain. May we live according to the same hope that filled Billy's life with joy and laughter.

—Christopher B. Harbin