

Seeking Refuge During Trials and Temptations

Psalm 91

New Testament: Luke 4:1-13

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On Wednesday we began our 40-day Lenten journey toward our celebration of the Easter promise of resurrection and eternal life. We began with the observance of Ash Wednesday, when we acknowledged our sinfulness and our mortality. Sinfulness and the call to repentance are often emphasized during Lent, especially in light of the fact that it was human sinfulness that put Jesus on the cross. But the good news is that we don't have to remain in the miry bog of our sinfulness. Just as we were reminded of our sinfulness with the imposition of ashes on our forehead, immediately following the ashes we celebrated the Lord's Supper, which served as a vivid reminder that God meets our sinfulness with his redemptive love. To be sure, a certain level of somber humility is in order as we embark on our Lenten journey toward the cross and the empty tomb.

But Lent is about much more than putting on sackcloth and ashes. Lent is also about turning our hearts toward God as our redeemer who meets us with his righteousness and grace and forgiveness. Lent is about encountering God and being transformed by our encounter. Our Lenten disciplines should help us deepen our knowledge and understanding of who God is—and therefore also deepen our faith and trust in God.

That's why once again this year we are turning to the Psalms during the season of Lent. Perhaps more than any other portion of the Bible, the Psalms help us discover God and our relationship with God. The Psalms are deep in theology. The Psalms are deep in the analysis of the human predicament. And the Psalms demonstrate for us a deep and abiding devotion to which any believer in God and follower of Jesus Christ should aspire.

And so our Lenten theme this year is "A Disciple's Devotion." Together may we explore the depths of faith as timelessly expressed in the Psalms, that our own personal and corporate devotion to God will be deepened and strengthened. Hear now the word of God as it comes to us this morning from the 91st Psalm...

Security is something for which everyone longs. Life can be a challenge, and at one time or another we all seek protection or refuge from things in life that threaten to overwhelm us. We seek a sense of security to protect us from a world that threatens us with trouble.

These economic times have created levels of stress and anxiety that I have not witnessed before in my adult life. I'm not even sure that 9/11 had the long, drawn-out impact on our own sense of security that we're witnessing today. Unemployment in this county hovers near 15%. On any given week we have in the neighborhood of 20 families seeking help with their electric bills; some of them have houses or mobile homes that are less than 1,000 square feet, yet with heating bills that have exceeded \$300, \$400, \$500.

Nor is our church immune to the stresses and anxieties created by the economy. At our session meeting this week we looked with great concern at the possibility of facing a deficit in our operating budget that may be as large as \$50,000 by the end of the year, unless we find more ways to cut expenses or raise revenues; we're doing everything we can to try to maintain our level of outreach to our community, to the work of the greater church, and to our mission involvement around the world. This year as part of my involvement in the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of New Harmony, I've visited with four different sessions, trying to convince them that the answer to their problems and worries won't be found by simply asking their pastors to leave. These economic times have taken a serious toll on people.

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And it is to this longing for security and refuge that the 91st Psalm speaks this morning. "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'"¹ The 91st Psalm is one of the most beautiful expressions of faith and trust in the sovereign protection of God that one will find in all of Scripture. Athanasius, one of the early church fathers in the 4th century, and one of the leaders who helped craft the theology of the Nicene Creed, said of this Psalm, "If you desire... to stablish yourself and others in devotion, to know what confidence is to be reposed in God, and what makes the mind fearless, you will praise God by reciting the [ninety-first] Psalm."²

A disciple's devotion will be greatly strengthened when we consider the sovereignty and the providential care of God over all of creation. The 91st Psalm reminds us that, in a world filled with trouble and temptation, God is there to help us navigate the way through. Like the eagle that wraps its wings around its young, so will God surround us with God's strong and abiding presence. In the words of the 91st Psalm we find the assurance that "in times of trouble, joy, sickness, health, vibrancy, sadness, loneliness, and death, we have a divine friend who walks with us, cries with us, loves us with a continuing, deep, and abiding love."³

As I was studying for this morning's sermon, I came across a story about Lord Craven, a Christian nobleman living in London during one of the epidemics of plague in the 15th century. In order to escape the spreading pestilence Lord Craven determined to leave the city for his country home, as many of his social standing did. He ordered his coach and baggage made ready. But as he was walking down one of the halls of his home about to enter his carriage, he overheard one of his servants say to another, "I suppose by my Lord's quitting London to avoid the plague that his God lives in the country and not in town." It was a straightforward and apparently innocent remark. But it struck Lord Craven so deeply that he cancelled his journey, saying, "My God lives everywhere and can preserve me in town as well as in the country. I will stay

¹ Psalm 91:1-2

² Athanasius, quoted in James L. Mays, *Psalms*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 296.

³ Katherine Amos, in Bartlett and Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 34.

where I am.” So he stayed in London. He helped the plague victims, and he did not catch the disease himself.⁴

The faith of this Psalm declares that our God lives everywhere and can preserve us wherever we find ourselves. It is a faith that urges us to face our troubles in the refuge and shelter of God’s providential care.

There is a possible pitfall in the interpretation of this Psalm. Some can read into these verses a guarantee that invoking God’s name will make us immune from harm. Some have used this Psalm as a promise that, if we just have faith, God will do whatever we ask.

I’m reminded of the story of a woman who was at work when she received a phone call that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left her work and stopped by the pharmacy to get some medication. She got back to her car and found that she had locked her keys in the car.

She didn’t know what to do, so she called home and told the baby sitter what had happened. The baby sitter said, “You might find a coat hanger and use that to open the door. But hurry, because the fever’s getting worse.”

The woman looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger that had been thrown down on the ground. But she had no idea what to do with it. So she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help. Within five minutes an old rusty car pulled up, with a dirty, greasy, bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag on his head. The woman silently shot another prayer to God, “This is what you sent to help me?”

The man got out of his car and asked her if he could help. She said, “Yes, my daughter is very sick. I stopped to get her some medication and I locked my keys in my car. I have to get home to her. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?”

He said, “Sure.” He walked over to the car, and in less than a minute the car was opened.

The woman hugged the man and through her tears she said, “Thank You So Much! You are a very nice man.”

The man replied, “Lady, I am not a nice man. I just got out of prison today. I was in prison for car theft and have only been out for about an hour.”

The woman hugged the man again and with sobbing tears cried out loud, “Oh, Thank you God! You even sent me a professional!”

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could simply snap our finger, and God would make everything right? Some have interpreted the 91st Psalm to make that kind of promise: “Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”⁵ These were verses that the devil quoted to Jesus when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. “The devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to Jesus, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you...’”⁶ The temptation was to believe that

⁴ This story of Lord Craven is found in James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), p. 749.

⁵ Psalm 91:9-12

⁶ Luke 4:9-10

God would automatically protect his people from trouble. The temptation that these verses offer is that there is a magical formula for making God shield us from all trouble and misfortune. Believe it or not, there were times when people would wear an amulet containing verses from this Psalm, as if the words themselves were a guarantee of protection against disaster and evil. But that's not what the 91st Psalm promises.

The psalmist doesn't offer us a magical formula—if only you turn to God, nothing bad will befall you. Jesus plainly saw that what the devil suggested was a test of God, and not trust. Real trust doesn't put God to the test. In fact, the psalmist acknowledges that even those who call upon God are not immune for troubles, for when God promises “I will be with them in trouble,”⁷ the implication is that there are times when God's people find ourselves in trouble.

But what the Psalm does promise is that there is no evil that can thwart God's goodness. “What the psalmist affirms here is that no evil can overwhelm God's good creation, and that good lies before, beneath, and after all evil.”⁸ No matter what may befall us, the faith of the Psalm declares that God is greater, that there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God; that there is Someone to whom we can turn in times of trouble and temptation, and we will find refuge and shelter; that that Someone is God, who is with us, and who will show us his salvation.

Writing in the aftermath of World War II, John Kuizenga noted that it was the faith in the providence and sovereignty of God expressed so beautifully in the 91st Psalm that brought forth light into the deep darkness of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. He said, “[God] rules also the world of men; he even rules and controls the malevolence and malice of society. When he allows the tempest and tornado of human wickedness, it is only because he plants his footsteps on that seething sea, and rides upon the storm. His faithfulness never fails. Those who put their trust in him are still the special charge of his angels, and still to this day, when unbelief says it cannot be done, the young lion and the adder and the dragon are trampled underfoot. The sovereignty of God, the universal sway of his providence...these are the stars that shine out anew in the night that threatened Europe and all the world.”⁹

And, my friends in Christ, the sovereignty of God and the universal sway of his providence are also the stars that shine anew in the night that threatens us today—whether that night be the fear of terrorism, or the economic woes, or the devastation of natural disaster. It is trust in God's sovereign power and providential care and love that creates within us the devotion that cries out, whatever our circumstances may be, The Lord is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust. And it is the same devotion of the disciple who knows that enables us to hear God's promise when he answers, “When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble... With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.”¹⁰

Amen.

⁷ Psalm 91:15

⁸ Roger Gench, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Feb 2010, p. 24.

⁹ John Kuizenga, “The Shadow of the Almighty,” in *Theology Today*, 1947, p.p. 17-18.

¹⁰ Psalm 91:15-16