

In The Shelter of God

Midweek Lenten Service

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March 9, 2022

Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16



- ⁹ Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
¹⁰ no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.
- ¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
¹² On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.
- ¹⁴ Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
¹⁵ When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.
¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

Two years ago, we sat in this same space together and reflected on the words from a different Psalm: Psalm 121, in which God promises to help us and keep us safe, even as we wonder where our help will come from. I told you how I couldn't sleep the night before because of wondering about how to respond to the tornado that had days before come through Nashville, and from wondering also if what then we only knew as "the coronavirus" might affect our schools and church programming. Two years ago, we left and couldn't help from hugging, even when we weren't sure we should anymore. From this small, sacred space we departed into a Lenten season that was far more dust- and death-filled than we had predicted, unknowingly not to gather together inside this sanctuary again until nearly a year later.

Tonight, we gather around Psalm 91, a little more worn and tired than we were before. Yet we are met again with God's promises of deliverance and of strength, of hope and of shelter. We meet in the darkness to prepare our hearts for the unraveling of the world and the new creation to come.

After these past two years, I find myself more ready for spring and for Easter than ever. I want the life! The sunshine! The resurrection! And so here we are in Lent, and I find myself reflecting on how to lean intentionally into the season without jumping ahead. We need hope in our life, and yet we also

are living in the midst of a world of pain. How do we hold onto the joy to come while also leaning into the waiting and brokenness of the here-and-now?

New York Times Opinions columnist Margaret Renkl wrote this week a piece entitled “What To Do With Spring’s Wild Joy in a Burning World.” Even the title of this piece stuck with me as the question I’ve been wrestling with this Lent. In this life, the blooming tulips and budding trees are coaligned with the devastation in Ukraine and the continued ravage from the pandemic. And so Renkl writes, “Turn your face up to the sky. Listen. The world is shivering into possibility. The world is reminding us that this is what the world does best. New life. Rebirth. The greenness that rises out of ashes.” We are in the ashes in these 40 days. But the ashes we marked ourselves with last Wednesday were burned from the palms of last year’s Holy Week, and we will be met in a few weeks once again with palm branches and Easter lilies abounding. And so is the cycle of life. This Lenten season is not just about living and dying or choosing which to focus our efforts on. It is to remember that we are broken and yet made whole; sinful and yet full of grace; dying and yet being continually invited to new life.

It’s in this knowledge that Jesus is able to resist the devil’s temptation in the wilderness, which we discussed this past Sunday—the knowledge that life is not to just be conquered without consequence, but to be experienced together through its hardships and triumphs. So when the devil draws on Psalm 91 to challenge Jesus that the angels would not allow him to dash his foot against a stone, Jesus rejects evil without question. The promise of God in the Psalm is not that we will not experience harm, but that we are not alone. We are not called to test the Psalmist’s words—in fact, I would caution you against stepping on a snake or kicking a boulder to see if a promise of a painless life holds true. The promises of this Psalm coexist with other Psalms of lament, which call out to God about the chaos, uncertainty, and pain of the world. These together emphasize our human need to draw on God for shelter.

But what does this look like? How do we make God our refuge in the midst of the difficulties of life and in our own fallenness? Through grace, we are called to respond; we don’t take the first step in approaching God but, rather, God is always with us. This is certainly a gift amidst our human way of thinking that we can go at it alone—and, in fact, that was what the devil was tempting Jesus to do: to claim as his own the profits and kingdoms of this world without relying on relationship with God. When we lean into ways that are not self-serving but instead are God- and community-oriented, we find strength that is beyond what we would have alone.

There’s an Irish saying, “It is in the shelter of each other that the people live,” meaning that we do not exist on our own. It’s in creating community and investing in one another that we all flourish. This saying inspired Pádraig Ó Tuama’s prayer, “A Place for Shelter and Shadow”:

We know that sometimes we are alone, and sometimes we are in community.
 Sometimes we are in shadow, and sometimes we are surrounded by shelter.
 Sometimes we feel like exiles--in our land, in our languages and in our bodies. And sometimes
 we feel surrounded by welcome.
 As we seek to be human together, may we share the things that do not fade: generosity, truth
 telling, silence, respect and love.
 And may the power we share be for the good of all. We honor God, the source of this rich life.

And we honor each other, story-full and lovely.

Whether in our shadow or in our shelter, may we live well and fully with each other.

God is with us in both the shelter and in the shadow of life, and as God abides in us so we abide in God. God gives us shelter in unexpected ways, small respites from the harms of life that remind us of God's love. The shelter of community when we feel alone. The shelter of a sunny day when we are despairing. The shelter of the church when we need to hold faith together. We, too, can offer this shelter to one another. Whether it is physical shelter, like our commitment to the Williamson County Homeless Alliance, or an emotional shelter, such as a Stephen Ministry relationship or a prayer shawl hand-knitted and prayed over—when we offer shelter to one another, we show God's love and are reminded in turn that we do not travel in this weary world alone.

As we continue in this Lenten journey towards the cross, the dust and ash rise around us. We journey towards death in our sinfulness, yet we are promised a new life full of grace that rises from the ashes. And so, in the days ahead we are called to embrace both the fallenness of this world and also the hope that continues to abound. Our shelter and strength lie in the Lord, who is making all things new. Amen.