

Living in the Shelter Psalm 91

One of the most astounding things about very small children is the degree of trust they put in their parents, warranted or not. They go through their day with absolute confidence that their parents are taking care of things. There will always be food on the table, strangers won't hurt them, they even have the power to make boo boos all better and take the sting out of nightmares and thunderstorms.

Somewhere along the way, though, it becomes apparent to us that the world is not an absolutely benign, safe place, and that there are things out there that our parents are powerless to protect us from. Kids at school say mean, hurtful things. The beloved family dog dies. A classmate is hit by a car walking home from school. Parents divorce.

It would be nice to be able to say that as we grow and mature that the world becomes less threatening place, but the truth is that we become more vulnerable, not less. The Psalmist generically labels all those dangers out there -deadly pestilences, terrors of the night, arrows that fly by day, destruction that wastes at noonday, but unfortunately, you and I know them more specifically: Drunk drivers. Retirements cut short by illness. Birth defects. Drive by shootings. Cancer. Financial ruin. And no matter how much insurance we buy, no matter how many vitamins we take and no matter how much we exercise, no matter how deep our financial cushion, no matter how vigilantly we watch over our children, it becomes more and more clear to us how just much is beyond our control. None of the things we put our trust and security in can keep us absolutely safe.

Eventually we realize that the only one who can keep us safe is God.

That is the assurance that Psalm 91 give us. It take us back to those early childhood days, to that time of utter peace and calm and trust. It assures us of the very thing that we have longed for since we were young, that someone is, in fact, looking after us, protecting us, keeping us safe. It assures us that in the midst of all of the arrows and terrors and deadly pestilences, God is our refuge, our fortress, our hiding place; a shield in front of us in life's battles. God will shelter us like a mother bird, gathering us under his wings where nothing can frighten or hurt us. We can rest safe in God's care, just as we once slept peacefully in our own parents' arms.

There's only one problem: anyone who lives in the real world knows it isn't true. God's protection doesn't provide immunity from the dangers of the world, no matter how great your faith is, no matter how loudly you call on the name of the Lord. There was a story in last week's paper about the pastor of a mega-church in the Dallas area who was recently diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. Tony Dungy, the former coach of the Indianapolis Colts and a man of great faith, lost a son to suicide. Faithful Christians who regularly call on the name of the Lord don't get their sick children healed, or their jobs spared in a recession. No one would ever dare suggest that only heathens and reprobates lost their lives on September 11th, or that soldiers who are faithful and devout Christian

soldiers somehow dodged the bullets that felled their non-believing comrades. Churches are full of abused wives and cheated-on spouses and people living with HIV-AIDS.

So how do we reconcile this? How can we say that God is our refuge and fortress while we are waiting on the bank to foreclose on our house?

You may not like my answer, but I think it means taking another look at the how we understand the concept of shelter and protection. What are we saying when we affirm that God will keep us safe under his wings? Safe from what?

Well, from heartache and suffering and poverty, we hope. From disease and flood and earthquake and the pain of watching our children be in pain. From car crash and miscarriage and Alzheimer's and injustice.

But here's the thing: God has never promised that we would be delivered from pain or hardship. What was promised is that we would be delivered from evil.

It would be nice to think that this Psalm is a magic talisman that would protect us from all harm in life, what it more realistically does is remind us that there is something more at stake than just my relative ease. It reminds us that the battle, if you want to call it that, isn't just between hardship and ease, pain and comfort; it's between good and evil.

Frankly, we have only ourselves to blame. Ultimately, it is human sin that is behind most of the pain and heartache in the world. And while we can't expect that God will bend the laws of nature if our car ends up in the wrong place at the wrong time, or undo all of the accumulated effects that bad habits and diet have on our bodies, what God does promise is refuge in the midst of it. Disease might strike us, but it doesn't have the power to hurt us, not ultimately. We might find ourselves penniless, but we will not be destroyed. Our children might be taken from us, but even that won't undo us. Because our shelter is in God, not in an easy life. What keeps us safe in life isn't money, or health, or happiness. It's God's love and companionship, the assurance that God will never abandon us in our misery.

That's a tough thing to remember and believe when you are in the midst of rough seas, where you feel anything but safe and secure, so the Psalm this week, along with the other two readings, give us a tool to carry along with us for help. Our story. They invite us to become storytellers. The first story we need to learn and commit to memory is the story of our ancestors, how God had always been with them, even when it looked like evil was going to win out. That's what we heard in the reading from Deuteronomy this morning: "I remember how our ancestors were slaves in Egypt, but God made them strong and led them out into freedom. I remember that they were only supposed to go through the wilderness, and how their own lack of faith kept them there for forty years, but through it all God stayed with them and gave them food and water and people to lead them." I remember that, in the end, God brought us to this good land, and was faithful to his promises. You get the idea. I remember that things we bad, but you were with us and in time, you rescued us.

And then learn to tell your own story. Look for signs that God's wings were covering you, sheltering you, protecting you along the way. For some of you that might mean looking at it in a different way than you ever have before.

"We were poor as church mice during the Depression, but my mother made sure that there was always something on the table for us to eat, no matter what."

"I fought in the war and saw things and had to do things that no human should ever have to see or do, but between the love of the people waiting back home and the strength God gave me, I somehow survived."

"My parents bore more resemblance to Miss Hannigan in Annie than to Ward and June Cleaver, but between caring Sunday School teachers and the parents of my friends, God always seemed to fill that void in my life with other caring adults who could guide and nurture me along the way."

Your life probably hasn't always been easy or without pain, but I'll bet that if you look at it carefully, you will see signs that God's wings have been over you, protecting you. Not from pain, but from evil. It is a good story to learn and to practice telling, over and over and over, so that the next time you find yourself facing the terrors of the night or the destruction that wastes at noonday, you won't lose hope. You will remember that the wings of God cover you, and that in God's fortress you will be kept safe.

As long as people have been around, I suspect, they have been asking how a God that is good and loving could allow pain and suffering. We have come to believe that it is God's job to clean up after us, keep us from experiencing the consequences of our own sin and brokenness. We don't want a savior so much as a servant. The forgiveness part is a nice bonus, but what we really want is a soft life. But in her observations about the temptation of Jesus, one lectionary blogger (Dylan Breuer) points out that "It's the devil, not God, who promises us safety and success."

Maybe there is a difference between safety, and being safe. The dangers are out there, they always will be as long as our world remains the broken mess we have made it. But even in the midst of them, even in the midst of pain and heartache, God will keep us safe. God will never abandon us. Thanks be to God.