

Camping in the Almighty's Shade

Psalm 91, John 17:9-21

Center Church, Hartford

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If you can find a Bible near you, open it to Psalm 91 (p.537). Sometimes it helps to look at a Bible reading as well as hearing it read. Look at verse 9 and read from there to the end, silently.

“Because you have made the Lord your refuge...no evil shall befall you.” “Those who love me I will deliver.” Wow. My first response every time I read this Psalm is, “how wonderful.” My second response is “not true.” Right now, I expect each of us could think of someone we knew or know who loved God and lived a faithful and loving life who ended up with cancer or was a crime victim or died in a car crash. And we can also think of people who seem so hateful and hurtful and yet live long and prosperous lives! No, we might shout to God, what the Psalmist sings is just not true!

Which sends us back to remembering what the language of so much of the Bible is, and especially what the language of poetry is, for the Psalms are meant to be sung poems. Poetic language is full of metaphors, full of exaggeration, full of deep hopes presented as realities. This Psalm is a song of love from someone who has come through deep troubles and now is thankful to God and wants to share the hope they have found in faith. It is not a set of instructions to avoid trouble all your life, nor a condemnation of those whose faith is seen as weak because they are suffering. The Psalms are words from people to God, and not the other way around, just like our hymns and worship songs.

It's important for us to understand that, so we do not beat ourselves up for having inadequate faith or have unrealistic expectations of life or stop believing in God because this doesn't come true as presented here. Stuff happens. To everyone. It is simply not true that either “only the good die young,” or “if you only have faith God will always protect you from anything bad and you will live to a ripe old age.”

Inside the poetry of the Psalm, however, is a really important concept for the life of faith: God does enable us to live beyond our fears and does indeed promise to, as the Psalm says, “be with us in trouble.” It's the same understanding of God we hear in the 23rd Psalm “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me, you rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Or what Jesus prays for according to the John reading we heard, reminding God that he (Jesus) protected his little band of radicals and now asks God to continue to protect them. Or what we pray for every time we say the prayer whose words Jesus told us were appropriate for prayer: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

If I listed every time in the Bible that someone prayed to God for protection from someone or something, those prayers would encompass a great deal of this book! Clearly, our ancestors in the faith believed that God could be, would be, wanted to be present with us in times of struggle and trouble. And that this presence did offer us protection from being consumed by fear and hopelessness and despair. That this presence could, would and did empower them and us to stand strong in the midst of the evil of the time.

Most of all, perhaps, that God's presence, often seen in the presence of human helpers, meant that we did not face anything alone. That's Jesus' prayer, "that they may be one as we are one." Strength in numbers, when the individual "ones" become one.

Poetry is, along with humor, the hardest thing to translate from one language to another. It helps when reading the Bible to look at more than one English translation to get new insights. The Common English Bible translates Psalm 91 verse 1 like this: "Living in the Most High's shelter, camping in the Almighty's shade."

Isn't that a wonderful image? Camping in the Almighty's shade. We need to reclaim that word "shade" from its current meaning, where "to throw shade" means to say hurtful things about someone. What the words of the Psalm are talking about is the exact opposite: when God throws shade, it's protection. God takes the heat of the sun to give us relief. God empowers us to take the heat of the sun for someone else to give them relief. Depending on what is going on in our lives at any given time, our place may change from being the one protected to being God's instrument of protection, to being "allies" to those under threat.

I'd like to spend a few moments with you invoking this image from the Psalm, imagining Jesus' image of us being one with each other and one with God, of being in the shade or being the ones who offer protection to someone.

If you are comfortable doing so, close your eyes. First, consider your own life. Where do troubles, small or large, beset you? Of what are you afraid? Is there evil you need to be delivered from? Now see yourself sitting in the sun. Imagine the heat. Now imagine shade coming over and around you, cooling you, giving your eyes a rest from the glare, helping your tense and tired muscles relax. The shade is God. Feel that presence. (Pause)

Now that you have experienced that shade, take a moment and consider who in your life or in this world needs protection. Who is sitting vulnerable in any way? Who is afraid? Who is cringing away from the glare and the heat of this world? Pick one, and picture them in your mind sitting in that same sun as you were.

Sensing the presence of the people in this room, and others you may know about who are trying to bring relief. Imagine that you come together, arm in arm, to surround the vulnerable ones, shading them from harm as much as you can. Helping to cool them, shield them from glare, relieve their pain. You cannot do it alone. We cannot do it alone, so that same shadow that God brought to you comes here as well.

Just sit with this image for a moment.

Now come back and open your eyes.

The great and faithful man Henri Nouwen once used the image of the Christian as the “Wounded Healer.” We go back and forth between needing the healing of God and the community and being among those who bring healing. The Psalm is our cry and our hope. Jesus tells us how to make that hope real. Let us reach out to the community and to God when we suffer and are vulnerable.

Let us be one with those who suffer and are vulnerable, as was Jesus, truly allies, even when it is hard and the sun beats down on our back. Let us remember that in both cases, God is with us. Friends, receive God’s healing shade. Then, when you are able, throw the holy shade of love and protection wherever and whenever and on whomever we can.
Amen.