

Sermon, February 14, 2016 - Lent 1

The Lord . . . Is My Refuge!

Psalm 91:1–13



Dear Friends in Christ,

May God's peace be with you always!

This is the first Sunday in Lent which begins with Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday brings us face-to-face with our mortality as we crossed the threshold into another season of Lent, it reminds, it points to the inescapable, the death of every human being: 'Remember that you are dust and to dust

you shall return" we were told. It is a true reality, yet not many like to be reminded of that reality, instead we like to be uplifted, we like to be pointed to life and its beauty, that life is good, not that we will die one day, it's so depressing, so, well dead!

Yet for centuries God's people have reminded of this reality in what we know as "The Psalter," a prayer book used for daily catechesis. There is instruction in prayer—especially prayer that echoes back to God's Holy Word—prayed for centuries by his people of old.

The Psalter begins with Psalm 90, also reminds people of the reality of death, for it says: "You return man to dust and say, 'Return, O children of man!' " (Ps 90:3). There, Moses prays, lamenting the brevity of life and the reality of God's wrath against sin, a wrath that carries with it an inevitable, inescapable death for every human being. Every day brings you closer and closer to that reality, therefore it is good to ask God; "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Ps 90:12).

And as we count our days to gain a heart of wisdoms, in that wisdom we realize that even death brings about beauty, and more even before we die. For today, through the second psalm in the Psalter we realize that God's people, in faith and trust, call upon him for salvation.

Psalm 91 is the bases for our meditation, which I would like to invite you to read with me the first 13 verses:

P: He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

C: I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

P: For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence.

C: He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

P: You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day,

C: nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

P: A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

C: You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked.

P: Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place— the Most High, who is my refuge—

C: no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent.

P: For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.
C: On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.
P: You will tread on the lion and the adder;
C: the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.

Beautiful Psalm, don't you think so? Here the anonymous psalmist prays with confidence amid the real terrors of the night and the dangers that darken our doorstep even in the daytime. God's dear ones of every age have faced the old evil foe, but they've never faced him apart from God's promise of protection. So it is for you, dear child of God. Gone is the lament of death. Today, we are invited to the joyful, confident confession of refuge in the shadow of the Almighty—no matter what may come. What better way for us to journey to the cross this season of Lent!

Sadly, such confidence, such trust, is not our natural way. Instead we turn this confidence and trust into a way of test, rather than trusting God, we test God. Since the beginning just as with Adam and Eve, today the slithering serpent still likes to play on your confident faith, in order to turn you from trusting to testing. He tickles your desires. The devil twists God's commands and promises, with his goal of plunging you into the depths of doubt and uncertainty.

A clear case that illustrates this point is the story of Gregory James "Jamie" Coots, that Pentecostal pastor in Kentucky who was featured in the National Geographic Channel reality television show *Snake Salvation*. He died February 15, 2014 from guess what, a rattlesnake bite during, he received during a service.

Coots believed he had a special anointing from God that protected him from any harm from the snakes that he handled. Why not? Doesn't God promise that in today's psalm (v 13) there we read: "You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot." Jesus also promised his disciples that serpents will not harm them. (Mk 16:18) Upon Coots's death, the network released a statement to CNN noting his devout faith even in the midst of the dangers he faced.

Was Coots's snake handling a sign of a devout faith, or rather, was it reckless behavior that misunderstands and tests the promise of God? Psalm 91 is not an invitation to "test" the Lord by seeking out danger and peril at every opportunity. It's a misunderstanding not only of this particular verse, but of the entire psalm. That was actually Satan's twisting of this psalm when he foolishly attempted to ensnare our Lord. That's his game plan for you too.

Yes, the Lord indeed promises protection in the midst of dangers. He promises that nothing can separate us from his love in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:39). But nowhere is this an invitation for us to put him to the test. Jesus proved that when he outwitted Satan with a right understanding of Scripture: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Lk 4:12).

What about us today? We should examine ourselves as well. In what ways have we tested God with our reckless behavior, rather than trusting him with a confident faith? Do we take refuge under the shadow of his wings for forgiveness, or do we use his forgiveness as a crutch, a license to continue living recklessly in the sins we love? We like to go on living as usual with the choices and ideas we have come up with justifying it by saying well God created me that way; or by saying God will forgive me tomorrow or on Sunday. On Ash Wednesday we meditated on the fact that we need

God's forgiveness but also on the need to forgive other's trespasses against us as we pray in the Lord's prayer, yet we find it difficult to forgive others when they have "trespassed against us" because we were hurt so deep, but we justify our unforgiveness of others by alleging that God will understand that! But, think about it, recognize the satanic ploys that so easily ensnare and defeat us. Unforgiveness is the single most popular poison that the enemy uses against God's people, and it is one of the deadliest poisons a person can take spiritually. It can also cause physical illness in a person. It does defeat us spiritually and even physically.

Therefore it does us good to repent of our unforgiveness of others.

Is there more? I think so! Lent is a good time to make an inventory of the way we live our lives, of the decisions we have made. It is a time to make an inventory of the thoughts that rule our lives, the philosophies that dictate our choices. Lent is a time to count our defeats and admit them.

Remember we sin actions, thoughts and words, but remember also that any sin defeats us! Therefore, let's confess those sins. Confess your sins of weakness. Admit defeat. But don't walk away defeated.

You and I don't always walk away the victor. In fact, we rarely do. But your defeat doesn't mean you're done for. That's the blessed gift of your Baptism into Jesus. It's a Baptism into his death and his resurrection. It's a Baptism into his victory, to share in his victory, no matter how many times you've been ensnared and defeated. Living in daily repentance and faith, you can enjoy the refuge of his victory as you receive his gifts in Word and Sacrament. Yes, you can admit defeat, yet still live in victory, his victory. What is his victory all about?

The Son of God was tempted for real, just as you are. Satan led him to the pinnacle of the temple and tempted him with the very words of today's psalm: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone' " (Lk 4:9-11). But Jesus took refuge in the promise of his heavenly Father. He held fast to God's promise rather than fall prey to Satan's lies.

Still, that wasn't the real victory. The devil went away from Jesus "until an opportune time" (Lk 4:13). Wasn't the most opportune time when your Savior hung from the pinnacle of the cross? There, the temptation intensified as he looked down at those who shouted, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (Lk 23:37). But he wasn't there to save himself. He was on that cross to save you. To save you from unforgiveness, but instead to give you plenty of love so you can love others. He was on the cross to forgive your ignorance attitudes of personal choices that defeated you, instead in His forgiveness gives you a heart of wisdom that honors and praises God. He trusted, even then, even giving up the shelter of his heavenly Father, so that you would dwell in the shelter of the Most High forever.

Enter this season of Lent with confidence, dear Christian, the confidence of a God who grants you refuge in the victory of his Son. How fitting to begin the Sundays in Lent with this glorious psalm. The psalms are prayers. Pray them, just as God's people have always prayed them, even as your Lord Jesus prayed them. Pray them in the confidence of God's promise fulfilled in Jesus. He is your refuge, the shelter God has

provided for you. You live in the shadow of his wings, in his victory. Call upon him for salvation here and now, at the pinnacle of temptation, and even in the depths of defeat. In the name of Jesus. Amen.