

God's Hospitality
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
September 29, 2019
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

Did anyone else start singing *On Eagle's Wings* when Vickie read today's scripture?

Well, just wait...we are going to sing it together in just a little bit. But before we do, let's talk some about this text.

Today we are reading from the psalms. Unlike so much of the Bible which is narrative, in the psalms we get poetry and hymnody. We might most accurately compare the psalms to our hymnal – materials used for corporate worship. And just like our hymnal has various sections that address different topics, that are appropriate for different parts of worship, that reach different emotions, so the psalms do the same thing. In fact, if you've spent much time with the psalms you might know that there are some that simply about praising God, some that are filled with lament or complaints, some that are psalms of thanksgiving. Additionally, some of the psalms were meant to be sung for kings, some on the way to worship, some on the way into battle. In other words – there were and are psalms for every occasion, just as we have hymns and songs for every occasion.

And while generally Psalm 91 is talked about as a psalm asking for God's protection, scholars don't agree upon which situations it might first have been used for. In fact, scholars have named that it may have been used: by those in exile, by those seeking refuge in the Temple from persecutors, during recovery from illness, by kings before battle, in the case of persons being restored to the community, as a testimony of recent converts, and more.¹ And what this

¹ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "Psalms" in the New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IV (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1996) 1046-47

means for us, and probably part of why this psalm has such broad appeal, is that it is one that speaks to many places in our lives, many situations.

In fact, J. Clinton McCann, Jr. writes that although this psalm may have originally referred to a certain circumstance, “the image was broadened to mean the entrusting of one’s whole self and life to God in every circumstance.”²

And that feels good, doesn’t it? It is why, more than once, these words have been set to music. It is why this is a psalm with which we are familiar even if we couldn’t have named that it came from the book of Psalms or that it is psalm number 91.

And yet, there are some challenges that come with this psalm.

First is the reality that sometimes life hurts. And because that happens, we have to stop romanticizing this psalm or our faith. We have to stop pretending that loving God means nothing will hurt. And we have to stop assuming that either our health or illness, our financial success or failure, the status of our relationships, or anything is a reward or punishment for our relationship with God.

Unfortunately, it is easy to do a shallow reading of this psalm and to assume that if we just love God enough and trust God enough we will be protected from all things, we be kept out of harms ways. But when we do that, then we set ourselves up for even the common griefs and pains of this life to feel like punishment from God. And, if God is who we understand God to be, then that is simply not the case.

Rather, this psalm doesn’t protect us from the things we have defined as “bad” but instead reminds us that we are never alone...that no matter what happens in our lives, even if we cause hurts and pains for ourselves or others, God is always with us.

² McCann, 1047.

In 2011, when I was serving a congregation in Joplin, MO, the city was hit by an EF-5 tornado. Over 160 people died that night. Thousands of houses were damaged or destroyed. On top of that schools, churches, a hospital, parks and businesses were destroyed. In that community we had important conversations about God's presence during those 41 minutes when that tornado was on the ground churning up people's lives, those 41 minutes when too many people were dying and so many others were fearing for their lives. And time and time again the belief was reinforced that God was not differently present with those who lived or those who died, with those whose houses sat in the middle of the tornado's path or those whose homes, like mine, were a few miles outside the tornado's reach. While the tornado's interactions may have been different from place to place, we came to believe and to claim that God was present with each and every one in the middle of whatever pain they were enduring, whatever fear they were living in the midst of, or whatever relief and safety they experienced.

We came to believe what a victim of the Holocaust articulated so many years earlier when they wrote, "I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. And I believe in love, even though I don't feel it. And I believe in God, even when he is silent."³

We came to believe that God is always present, and that in our struggles the refuge God offers isn't about changing the circumstances in which we find ourselves, but about being our grounding force in the midst of them, being our companion and continuing to companion with us whether or not we even notice.

³ Three-line anonymous poem scratched on to a wall by a victim of the Holocaust, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/11372941/Survivors-remember-Auschwitz-Every-time-I-come-here-I-feel-fearful.html>

And this isn't just a belief that comes about in the midst of difficult times, but it is a belief that comes from the psalms, writings that are honest about the pain and struggle of this life and that are also able to affirm God's love and presence and companionship.

And so, "we should not use Psalm 91 as a magical guarantee against danger, threat, or difficulty. Rather, this psalm is a reminder that nothing 'will be able to separate us from the love of God.'"⁴

And when we can embrace that Truth, then it is no wonder the words of this psalm reach so deeply down inside us.

So, here is the second challenge of this psalm: to entrust "one's whole self and life to God in every circumstance."⁵

This is hard, because friends, trust is hard for us. Unfortunately, every one of us knows what it is to be disappointed in someone we trust. We know what it is to be let down. And, in many ways, that's why a superficial reading of this text is easier...because at some level it is easier to pretend that life is always about clear cause and effect, easier even to beat ourselves up for what we did wrong, than to trust in God's love and presence when things are hard and when, as that Holocaust victim named, we don't even feel it.

It is also difficult because if we entrust ourselves to God in every circumstance then we should be different, we should be changed. Just think about it. What would your life look like if you really trusted God always? Would your planning be different? Would your fear be reduced? Would your worry be reduced? Would you be more generous? Would you be more adventurous? Would you be more loving?

⁴ McCann, 1048.

⁵ McCann, 1047.

Friends, this psalm celebrates the presence of God with us always. It celebrates God's hospitality toward us. It celebrates that God always shows up, is always with us, never leaves us, welcomes us no matter what baggage or difficulty we bring.

So, let's celebrate this.

Let's believe in this.

And let's be changed by this. That we might not only receive hospitality from God, but that we might share God's presence, God's love, God's grounding with the world.

Amen.