

When We Feel Confidence in God  
Psalm 91 and Psalm 121  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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The refrain we sang earlier in the song “On Eagle’s Wings”, which is based on Psalm 91, says:

*“And I will raise you up on eagle’s wings,  
bear you on the breath of dawn,  
make you to shine like the sun,  
and hold you in the palm of my hand.”*

When we sing these words, we sing them with confidence...even as they are mingled with tough realities of life. We hear those in this song, too, if we listen to the verses. After all, the verses use phrases like “snare of the fowler” and “famine”, “terror of the night” and “arrow that flies by day”.

Our songs of faith, as well as the psalms, remind us that we often live in the both/and, in the midst of difficult realities *and still* with permission to feel confidence in God.

Psalms like the one we sang and like Psalm 121, which Nancy read for us, show us what it looks like to “[entrust] one’s whole self and life to God in every circumstance” (J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *New Interpreter’s Bible Volume IV*, 1047).

But this can be difficult for us.

After all, the hard stuff is real. There is hurt and pain in this life. There is injustice and too often life is unfair. We know what it is to be harmed by other people and sometimes by ourselves, to experience illness and death, to lose relationships and jobs and friends.

And sometimes we know what it is to be consumed by our questions to the point that they shake our faith. We even know what it is to read these psalms and wonder *who* God is protecting in these ways or what *we* have done wrong to not receive such attention. So some days, confidence may feel far off.

And yet we are reminded that scripture is to be taken seriously, even if not literally.

While the songs of the faith - from these ancient psalms to our songs and hymns today - may make proclamations that sound as if nothing bad will ever happen to us, the reality is that what we are really invited into isn't guaranteed protection from all harm, but rather we are invited into relationships with God that allow us to hold our questions even as we are consumed with the confidence that God is present. We are invited into relationships with God that allow us to feel confidence about God's care for each of us not only when life is good but when it is difficult.

Scholar and professor, J. Clinton McCann, Jr. writes, "The sheer eloquence and comprehensiveness of the psalmist's affirmation of faith make [the psalms] powerful. These same attributes, however, can also be a source of misunderstanding. For instance, many Jews and Christians have copied passages of [Psalm 91] and worn them in amulets to magically ward off danger; indeed, verses 11-13 have been used to support the notion that guardian angels protect us from harm. Illustrating such misuses of the psalm, in Luke 4:9-12 the devil quotes Ps 91:11-12 to tempt Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the Temple, but Jesus refuses." McCann goes on writing, "...Neither Jesus nor the apostle Paul sought to avoid danger or difficulty at the expense of being faithful...when Jesus did claim the assurance of the psalms, it was *from the cross*" (*New Interpreter's Bible*, 1048).

We sang Psalm 91; we read Psalm 121. While the images in these differ, both proclaim confidence in God. And both invite us to sing songs and pray prayers of confidence...confidence that God is with us...confidence that God cares for us...confidence that we matter to God.

While this doesn't mean that everything will be easy, it *does* mean that we do not go alone. While there may not be *literal* truth in words that claim that God will keep our feet from slipping or protect us from experiencing the evil things that come our way, there is Truth in the fact that God is always with us and that God cares for us, accompanying us through every moment of this life's journey.

I wonder what it feels like to you in those times when you feel confident of God's love and presence.

I wonder how that confidence can make a difference to others, how we can be compelled to stand up to evil, to risk ourselves for others, to make a difference in this world when we entrust our whole selves to God.

I wonder what songs we sing that are rooted in a place of confidence, that grow from that hopeful and committed place where we understand God to be with us even when life is difficult.

The slaves in our own country certainly knew about this. Whether it was the confidence in God's attention even in the midst of struggles that we hear in "There Is a Balm in Gilead" or the ways they sang coded language about the Underground Railroad to each other using songs like, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Wade in the Water." Or whether it is in later years as songs like "We Shall Overcome" became the hymns of the civil rights movement, songs of confidence even when all evidence seemed to the contrary.

I wonder what songs of confidence and prayers of trust we will write as we continue to journey together with God. History and hymnody, scripture and song remind us that we are invited to live, rooted in the confidence of God's love.

In the book *Everyday Psalms*, James Taylor rewrites Psalm 121. If you have the psalm booklet in your hands, you can read along as I read it aloud.

*Somewhere out there, past the highest peaks, someone watches over me.*

*God made these peaks and these valleys, this air and this earth.*

*Yet God is close enough to guide my feet, every step I take along life's precipitous paths.*

*I may grow weary, but God does not nod off; my mind may wander, but God always stays alert.*

*God watches over me.*

*God stays as close to me as the hat that shelters me from summer sun, as close as the jacket that shields me from the slashing rain.*

*God watches over me.*

*God's hand holds me when I crawl along the edge of a cliff; it saves me from delusions of depending only on myself.*

*God keeps me from falling off the edge, and keeps me safely on the path.*

*God watches over me.*

*Wherever I go, wherever I may find myself, God will go with me and watch over me, even into eternity.*

Now is the time when I invite you into a practice of responding to the psalm. Today we are going to rewrite the psalm - and you can choose either Psalm 91 or Psalm 121. If you have the booklet, both are there. Rather than just asking you to write a new version, I am going to invite you to do this line by line.

And if you are worshiping with another person, the two of you might choose to do this together - one taking the first line, the other the second and alternating back and forth.

So let me give you a quick example.

Psalm 121 begins, *"I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth."*

You might then write something like James Taylor did in his psalm we just heard where he wrote, *"Somewhere out there, past the highest peaks, someone watches over me. God made these peaks and these valleys, this air and this earth."*

Or you might respond not with a rewording of the psalm but with a response to it. Perhaps after reading, *"I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth,"* you write something like, *"God, I am confident that no matter where I am, when I need help you are here."*

There is no wrong way to do this. You are invited to let the psalm become your own. Take a few moments (push pause if you need to) and begin this exercise. Then I encourage you to continue working with it this week, letting your confidence in God find its song. Amen.