

A Song of Protection and Refuge

Message #6 in the series "Summer Playlist"

The Book of Psalms: God's Songs for Life"

Psalm 91

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Hello and welcome to St. Paul's Church. My name is Matt Skillen and it is my humble joy to share the Word of God with you today.

Today we are concluding a message series that we are calling "Summer Playlist"—a series that has brought together something of an eclectic song list taken directly from the Psalms. Together with Pastor David, Pastor John and Youth Director Dominic, we have examined several different kinds of Psalms or *songs* in this playlist: songs of lament and persecution, songs of love and trust, and songs of praise. Each has reminded us of the truly remarkable, unchanging grace and love that comes only from God, our Heavenly Father.

The book of Psalms has historically served as the songbook of both Jewish people and the early church. These would have been the words they sang and shared with one another in worship and in their communities. They served as foundations of faith formation for generations and generations of Hebrew families, and they were the tenants of new life in the Christian churches that formed after Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. Generation after generation has turned to this song book in times of praise, in times of prayer, in times of crisis and in times of quiet meditation. As we read these words we are joining a chorus of believers, past and present, who have lifted their voices to God in sanctuaries and synagogues, around campfires and over coffee, in prisons and underground churches, on slaveholding plantations and war-torn battlefields, at weddings, at funerals, and at baptisms and christenings. The Psalms have become something a playlist for our lives too.

As we've seen in this message series, the range of human emotion and human experience is captured in the Psalms, making it a very practical and easy-to-apply book of the Bible. We read the translated words in this text, and we may come to the chilling conclusion that, maybe, there really isn't anything new under the sun. Hebrew people, and indeed, Christians throughout the ages have felt desperate in times of great uncertainty. In other instances, they have been unable to adequately put words to the kind of love they feel from the eternal God and creator. And at one time or another we, along with our ancestors in the faith, have tried to convey through many varieties of worship how much we adore and seek to serve our gracious God. Just as these psalmists have been there, we've been there too.

As we prepare for today's message, I can't believe my good fortune. As a literature teacher I get to share a message with you based on a poem, the book of Psalms is a book of poetry. But it isn't just any poem, it is a jubilant poem about the remarkable and affirming assurance we find in our relationship to God. So buckle in because this optimistic, glass-is-always-half-full-to-overflowing literature professor is about to get elbows deep into a

passage of scripture that asserts a very powerful message. It is a song of refuge; a song of protection.

I've shared this story once before in a message here at St. Paul's Church. It's been a while so hopefully it will sound new to you if you've heard it before. When I was in youth group at Dublin Community church in Dublin, OH we would go on an annual youth retreat. Among the many activities we would do while on an overnight retreat is the trust fall. I hated the trust fall. Why? Because it requires trust. Maybe it was because I was a newer member of this youth group, or maybe it was because I had a healthy midwestern mistrust of people would willingly fall backward off of a platform when there was a perfectly good ladder set up next to it, I just didn't trust this activity. In truth, I didn't think there was any compelling reason for the people behind me to catch me.

That may be true for many of you. We've arrived at this very strange place where trust, it is hard to find. We don't trust the media, and we certainly don't trust the politicians. We don't trust other people and maybe we don't trust the church. This feeling of mistrust may have us searching for the places we can go for protection, the places we can go for refuge.

A key point that I want you to keep in mind as we look into God's word today is this: **God is our divine protector. In Him we find divine peace.**

We all come to worship with our own set of worries. And I think it is healthy to name the things that worry us—the things we are most anxious about. Have you ever noticed that when you name the thing you are most worried about, it seems a lot less worrisome? Ipsos, the international global advisory group that you see quoted often on your evening news programs and your social media feeds conducted a study two months ago to determine the top 18 things people all over the world are concerned about. What may not be surprising to you is that the overwhelming leader in this survey is COVID-19 (47%). That along with unemployment and poverty round out the top three. Do you know what was last on this list? Access to credit (1%) and right above it—childhood obesity (2%). From top to bottom this list ranks the broadly named challenges of our time and could very specifically point to the thing or things that keep you up at night too.

God's divine protection, his divine peace is present today just as it has always been when our psalmist sat down to write what we now know as Psalm 91 titled "The Assurance of the Lord." Most recently, I've learned the greatest cure of chronic uncertainty is God's assurance. Amen? And, in my recent and darkest hours, I've been encouraged by a very close friend and mentor to turn to the Psalms and today's reading might be a Psalm that you turn to in your hour of need. Because all hope, all healing, rest and restitution comes from the one who created all things. Amid all that we might be uncertain and anxious about, I also know that if one takes a moment to zoom out for just a moment, one will also find so many ways God has delivered us to this day, to be in this place, to worship in this sanctuary, to be present with one another.

This rather boisterous and jubilant Psalm begins with a resounding affirmation. Listen to how enthusiastic our psalmist begins. It says in verses 1 & 2

Psalm 91: 1-2

1 You who live in the shelter of the Most High,

***who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
2 will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust."***

As this passage of scripture opens, I think it is important to notice who this Psalm is addressed to. Notice immediately that the Psalmist is talking to a specific type of person. He's talking directly to those who "live in the shelter of the Most High."

Another way to say that is:

**Those who know God and abide in him
will proclaim He is their refuge and the one they trust.**

I hope this initial analysis isn't getting lost in translation. Here is what our poet for the day is saying. Those of us who know God and live in Him know that we have a fortress to run to no matter what may befall us in this life. You might be facing difficulty at work, you may have reached the point of no return with your spouse, you may even be facing significant medical issues. When the walls seem to be caving in from one direction, or in every direction, who do you run to? Who is your refuge? Who do you trust? Do you seek refuge in the one who is Most High? Because the truth is, life happens. The sin and brokenness of this world will eventually catch up to you one way or the other. You will experience some crisis in life. Some of us experience more disruption and crises than others. But when it finally lands at your front doorstep, who do you seek? For those who seek refuge in God Almighty, the Psalmist says there is a new assurance.

The poet continues by using this beautiful figurative language to describe, allegorically, what this assurance might look like. He uses imagery that would be readily available to a largely nomadic population. Listen as these words fly off the page.

***3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
4 he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
5 You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
6 or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.***

Isn't that reassuring. Do you see the beauty in the language used to describe how, like a large protective bird of prey, God places us, a much smaller bird-like figure under his wings. We are adorned with his pinons or feathers, and it is his wings that serve as a shield, as our shelter. The language is meant to be poetic and metaphorical as the writer mentions deliverance from traps and snares and pestilence or disease. What is interesting is that you'll note that our Psalmist doesn't say that we will avoid these problems and challenges. He doesn't say that somehow this life in devotion to God is without issue or trouble. No. Rather, when problems find us we have a place of refuge, a fortress to hold onto.

When we are about to reach our breaking point, when the traps of life ensnare us, and we run to the Father in prayer, appealing for relief... have you ever noticed how different your problems seem when you are fervently in prayer?

I was 32 or 33. I had two small children at home under the age of 4. My wife was working nights at the hospital; I was working days at the college. Friends, my nights with two babies were rough. I can remember one Friday night my kids took turns waking up to be changed and fed. Just as I was putting one down the other would wake up. I think I got about 45 minutes of sleep that night. The next day, Saturday, while Rebekah slept and rested for her next shift at the hospital I took the kids to the mall just to get out of the house. I had a nice double stroller that I could strap them into and just walk. I wasn't buying anything. I just needed a moment.

I can remember praying to God about how tired and weary I had become. After several days of sleepless nights, this last night was the one that was about to do me in. I asked God for refuge to restore my strength, to give me a shot of super-hero adrenaline to keep going. Then, walking right ahead of me in the crowded Park City mall I saw another dad, pushing a single stroller and an oxygen tank that his beautiful little daughter was using to breath.

The other dad and I met eyes. We gave each other a "hi" sign as if to say, "I see you." And we went our separate ways. As I continually reflect on that story I don't think God was telling me, "See, it could be worse..." But I firmly believe He was saying, "No matter what happens, I have you. When you are tired and weary I have you. When you think you've reached the end of your rope, I will catch you."

Those who call upon the Lord, who dwell in him will say to God, "You are the one I trust."

The Psalmist takes it up several notches as he continues to allay the fears of those who might be reading his words for the first time or for the fiftieth time that day. He goes on to say in verse 7:

**7 A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.**
**8 You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.**
**9 Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,**
**10 no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.**
**11 For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.**
**12 On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.**
**13 You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.**
In the face of life, God will deliver.

When I read this passage I wonder more directly who this psalmist is. I mean If you are down and facing a tremendous challenge, that message might send you to new levels of hope. It might pick you up when you are feeling discouraged, as you see injustice unfolding in your neighborhood or in your nation. It might give you a jolt of energy to be reminded that God can crush evil. He can cure illnesses. He can do amazing, unforetold things that we have never seen before in our lives. And it makes me wonder how God had moved so dramatically in this man's life. He pulls out all the stops and makes a pretty significant

checklist doesn't he? God must have moved tremendously in this man's life that he would convey so much in one passage.

Maybe you have lived through a miracle. You've seen with your own eyes how God has delivered you or someone you love from a tremendous peril. Maybe you haven't. Maybe the only miracles you've ever known are found in our biblical story. When we abide in God, our mighty fortress indeed, we know that in him we are alive. That even death fails to crush us because of the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. It is in this assurance that many have found refuge in their time of need and where we can find peace in the storm.

In the face of life, God will deliver.

Habakkuk, the ancient prophet of God to the Israelites, cries out in the first chapter of his prophesy that is found in the Old Testament. He laments asking God how long he must endure injustice and unrighteousness. How long must he witness violence and unrest in his city. In turmoil, Habakkuk says that he will return to his watch post— a place where God had performed tremendous miracles in the past. He returned to the place where he had found refuge in God from the storms of life as a reminder that God always delivers. And he said this is where I will wait and watch for God to deliver me once again.

In the face of life, God will deliver.

Think of also the Apostle Paul who, when under captivity, reminded the Corinthian church that we are pressed but not crushed, persecuted but not destroyed. Because we are in Christ we are alive! Let us not forget that God has delivered us from sin through Jesus's life, death and resurrection. Let us never forget to remember the cross.

In the face of life, God will deliver.

Where do you need to go today to remember how God delivers? Look, sometimes we have to wait for God's deliverance, and waiting will test our faith and endurance. For those who are still waiting, I need to tell you that God is working in you. He is shaping and molding you. When the waiting game becomes an overwhelming weight on your shoulders run into the arms of your heavenly father. Let his wings surround you.

Our poet for today concludes his psalm with a word from God. This is a shift in the voice and perspective of the poem. While the previous list of deliverances are still echoing in our ears, the psalmist drops this brief and lovely reminder to punctuate our affirmation.

***14 Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
15 When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.
16 With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.***

Friends, when we are weary of our immediate conditions, we must not lose sight of eternity. We must **zoom out**. When you shift your perspective for just a second and zoom all the way out to see how brief this life on earth is compared to an eternity in the Kingdom of God,

what on earth could possibly shake us? What illness could possibly bring us down? What circumstances could drop us in our tracks?

The ever present peace that comes with an assurance of who God is—the Creator of all things seen and unseen—what He has done—he sent his only Son to die on a cross so that we could live with him eternally—and how He continues to live through us—through the Holy Spirit that dwells in you and in everyone you meet. Our God is timeless, He is wild and His ways are higher and wilder than we could ever imagine.

For those who know God, those who dwell in Him, will say God is our fortress at all times and in all things. He is the one we trust.

Unlike the psalmist who wrote Psalm 91, we live at a time when the world has witnessed God in person, and his name is Jesus. For some of you, you might be asking, “Who is Jesus?” Jesus is the son of God who died for your sins.

What is sin? Sins are things we do that separate us from the heart of God. The Bible says that we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and the wage of sin is eternal death. But Jesus Christ lived a perfect life while here on earth and died for us. He died for our sins so that we would not live in death but we would live in eternal life.

We can be forgiven of our sins, the Bible is clear on this matter, it says that we only need to ask. If you have never asked God to forgive you of your sins I’m going to invite you to join me for a prayer we’re going to say it aloud and I am going to ask everyone to pray these words with me so that no one has to pray alone.

This is meant to be a private moment. A moment you can share with God and appeal to him right here today.

**God, I know I have sinned. Please forgive me.
I want to live for you.
You know my heart.
It is yours.
It is you I trust. Amen.**