

Warning and Promise

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we heard Jesus tell a parable about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man lives in luxury. He eats well, and dresses to the nines every day. At his gate lies Lazarus, a poor man covered in sores, longing to just eat the scraps from the rich man's table. The rich man never noticed Lazarus.

He never reached out. He never cared. In death, their fortunes are reversed. Lazarus was carried to Abraham's side – a term used in those days for Heaven – where he's comforted and secure. The rich man, however, found himself in torment, crying out for relief. Jesus' parable warns us of the danger of trusting in worldly comforts while neglecting God's call to compassion, justice, and holiness. It also reassures us that God sees the forgotten, the broken, and the overlooked – like Lazarus – and He provides them with safety, rest, and eternal shelter.

This morning's parable fits nicely with the psalm we're going to look at this morning. Psalm 91 speaks of safety, deliverance, and the nearness of God for those who dwell in His presence. In a world filled with uncertainty, violence, disease, political instability, personal trials, and decline in the Church in America and Europe, the words of the psalm ring with power. Our Methodist theological heritage reminds us that God's grace is prevenient – already at work before we're even aware of it – just as Lazarus experienced God's comfort despite being rejected by the world.

It's justifying – drawing us into right relationship with God and others – through Jesus Christ. And it is sanctifying – transforming us each day as we learn to trust more fully in what God has done, and is doing for us. Today we'll contemplate what it really means to find "safety in the Shadow of the Lord." If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16. **Read Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16.**

Dwelling in the Shelter of the Most High

The psalm begins with a word of confidence. "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust,'" (Ps. 91:1-2). Notice the verbs – dwell and rest. There are a lot of people running around, saying they're Christian, but they only occasionally visit God. Or they remember Him only in times of crisis.

Back in the days when Kendra and I were working up at the school in Botkins, the folks up there, most of them were Catholic, had a name for people like that. They called them CEI or CEN Christians – Christmas, Easter, and In Need of prayer – because that was the only time you saw them in church. We have a lot of CEI Christians running around Shelby County. That's no good. God gave the Church as the

vehicle to make Jesus known to the world. I would say, if they're only worshiping on Christmas, Easter, and when they need a prayer, they probably aren't doing daily Scripture readings and prayer. In other words, they don't have a living faith.

I know that sounds pretty harsh, but it is what it is. The psalmist, using these verbs of dwell and rest, uses them because he's making the point that it's all about abiding, living, and remaining in God's presence. Safety in the Lord isn't some passing feeling. It's a way of life. And you and I can't do it alone – we need a community surrounding us, lifting us up, and holding us accountable. John Wesley often talked about the need of Christians to have a living faith. He taught that salvation isn't just a ticket to Heaven. It's a present reality of abiding in Christ's love. Dwelling in God means that we live in daily trust, prayer, and holiness.

During the height of the pandemic when fear and isolation swept the globe, a lot of people wondered where they would find safety. Hospitals were overwhelmed, grocery store shelves were empty, school and churches closed. Into this, United Methodist Pastor Ed Villalta of the Wesleyan Heights United Methodist Church in Owensboro, Kentucky, began leading a daily prayer service over the phone. Every morning at 7:00, members dialed in, and they prayed together. For them, dwelling in the shelter of the Most High meant more than staying behind locked doors. It meant lifting their eyes to God, day after day, and remembering they were under His shadow. Though their homes were lonely, their hearts were united in the fortress of God's love.

Deliverance from Fear

The psalm continues with vivid imagery:

Surely He will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge; His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday, (verses 3-6).

We have three types of threats being addressed here. First, there are hidden traps. The "fowler's snare," reminds us of temptations and dangers that we don't see coming. The second type of threat addressed is sickness and disease. The writer refers to it as "deadly pestilence," and "plague." Those terms really hit home for those of us who lived through the pandemic.

The third threat addressed is violence and conflict. "The arrow that flies by day," represents wars, attacks, and violence in general. We live in a time where these threats are still very real. Global conflicts rage, gun violence fills the headlines, pandemics remind us of human frailty, and political instability breeds fear. And yet, into all this, the psalmist says, "You will not fear," (verse 5a).

A little over two years ago, in August, 2023, wildfires swept through the Hawaiian island of Maui. Residents fled in terror. Their homes and memories were turned to ash in a matter of minutes. But even in the devastation, a small church in Lahaina became a beacon of hope. Its walls were gone, its roof destroyed, but survivors gathered in the ruins to sing hymns. With smoke still lingering in the air, they lifted their voices in praise, finding courage in the presence of God. They lived out a truth in this psalm – “You will not fear the terror of night.” Their worship didn’t erase the tragedy, but it reminded them and the wider community that even in the ashes, God’s shadow stretched over them.

God’s Promises

The psalm shifts in the last part of today’s reading. “‘Because he loves Me,’ says the Lord, ‘I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges My name. He will call on Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him My salvation,’” (verses 14-16). God Himself speaks in these verses. And when we really examine them, we find He’s given us six promises.

The first promise is being rescued. God delivers us from sin and destruction. He does this through Christ’s death for us on the cross. The second promise is protection. The presence of God shields us.

The third promise is answered prayer. He hears us when we call. And He speaks to us every day – and we can recognize Him speaking to us if we’re spending time with Him in His word. Fourth, He promises us companionship. He says He will be with us in times of trouble.

The fifth promise He gives is deliverance and honor. And we see this play out in Jesus’ parable from this morning. God lifts up the humble. Lazarus enters into rest and comfort in Heaven. The sixth promise He gives us in our psalm is satisfaction and salvation. We gain eternal life in His presence. Someday we will see Jesus face-to-face! Or, as the old hymn says, “When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be! When we all see Jesus, we’ll sing and shout the victory!”¹

In 2014, during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, Christian health workers became living testimonies of this psalm. Many of them walked into danger daily, tending the sick, and comforting the dying. One United Methodist nurse in Sierra Leone, named Mbalu Fonnies, even said, “I know the risks, but I know my calling. If I die, I die in the shadow of the Lord.” Some of the nurses working with her did lose their lives. Their courage showed the world that God’s promises are not void. He was with them in their times of trouble. Their sacrifice bears witness to the greater deliverance

¹ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 701.

that comes to us through Jesus Christ. Salvation that disease – indeed, nothing – can take away from us (see Rom. 8:37-39).

Safety in an Uncertain World

We can't stick our heads in the proverbial sand regarding current events and what this psalm tells us. We see natural disasters all the time. Wildfires, hurricanes, and floods remind us of our vulnerability. Wars and conflicts raging from Ukraine to the Middle East show us that countless lives are shattered by violence, including right here at home, when we decide to settle things with a gun rather than entering into meaningful dialog with the other side. Hear me on this – I'm not saying guns are bad. But in the wrong hands, guns are dangerous weapons of destruction.

Economic instability is a threat. There are lots of families right here in Shelby County – even some in our own church family – who are struggling with rising costs, job insecurity, and fear of the future. And then there's public health to think about. Inadequate or unaffordable medical care, coupled with the memory of COVID-19, and new health crises as they emerge.

These realities may make Psalm 91 sound almost too good to be true. We have to keep in mind that the psalm doesn't promise us that there will be no trouble. It promises that God IS present with us in our times of trouble. Ukrainian United Methodists have opened their local church buildings as shelters for their fellow citizens fleeing from war in the east. They've become havens for frightened families.

The district superintendent of Kyiv told UM News that "We cannot stop the bombs, but we can remind our people that God is their fortress." That's safety – knowing that God is present, even in the middle of a war. Closer to home, UMCOR is usually one of the first rapid response teams to arrive after natural disasters like hurricanes in Florida or tornadoes here in Ohio. They often arrive before FEMA, before the Red Cross. They bring food, water, chainsaws – and prayer. For families who've lost everything, these volunteers become the living Shadow of the Almighty – offering shelter in both physical and spiritual form.

Living in the Shadow

So how do we apply this idea of living under the shadow of the Almighty to our daily lives? We need to trust daily in God's presence. Start each day with prayer – not just asking for protection, but recognizing and praising Him for His sheltering love. Refuse to be governed by fear. This world thrives on fear. As Christians, we're called out of the world – we're called to be courageous.

Show compassion the way Christ has shown compassion to us. Unlike the rich man, pay attention to all the Lazaruses surrounding us – the poor, the sick, the marginalized. God loves them – even if we don't – yet! Live with eternal perspective.

What I mean is this: remember that even if this life brings us trials, God's ultimate promise is salvation and eternal rest in His presence. We have to keep that in mind as we do what we do here below.

One last modern example of the psalm in action, this time closer to home. Church of the Cross, a United Methodist Church down the road in Kettering, Ohio, had been dreaming of expanding their sanctuary. They'd raised money for it for years. But when the pandemic hit and left a lot of families crushed by medical debt, that church made a radical decision.

Instead of building for themselves, they took the funds, partnered with another non-profit organization, and used the funds to buy – and forgive – over \$1 million of unpaid medical bills in the five counties around the Kettering area. Strangers they never met received letters saying, "Your debt is forgiven." That congregation chose to live under the Shadow of the Almighty, showing others what God's shelter looks like.

Psalms 91 is a testimony of trust – and it wasn't written by King David. Scholars think it was written by a Levitical priest. His name has been lost to time. Apparently the unnamed priest had his share of troubles, but also knew that God was always there with him. The rich man in Jesus' parable trusted in wealth and comfort – but it failed him. Lazarus, poor and broken, found safety in God's presence.

Today, God invites us into that same shelter. Whatever arrows fly by day, whatever terrors come by night, whatever pestilence stalks in the dark, you and I can rest in the Shadow of the Almighty. In a fearful world, the Church today has the unique opportunity to embody courage, compassion, and faith. We can say with the psalmist, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust," (verse 2)!

Prayer: Gracious Lord, You are our refuge and our fortress, our God in whom we trust. In a world filled with fear, give us courage. In a time of uncertainty, grant us Your peace. Teach us to dwell daily in Your shadow, to trust Your promises, and to share Your shelter with those in need. Through the Name above all Names we pray. Amen.