

Psalm 91

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.” For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.

When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

Psalm 91 was the focus of my sabbatical study one year ago. I spent a lot of time with it—appreciating it and arguing with it in turns.

It is a treasured psalm for many. It is sometimes referred to as the Trench Psalm because it’s often the go-to psalm for those in the trenches of life, whether literal or figurative. Soldiers, for example, often see their experiences within Psalm 91—wire entanglements, poison gas, mines, booby traps, shells by night, shrapnel by day, trench fever, destruction by the thousand. This has led many a soldier to sew Psalm 91 onto their battle uniforms, as a talisman or protective shield.

The Psalmist most likely is describing the perilous experiences of the children of Israel. Tents, predators, rocky landscapes all point to the Israelite’s nomadic existence in the Judaea mountains, with no paved roads at the time. The Psalmist sings: “God will deliver you from the snare of the fowler.” A snare is a bird trap, a loop of cords laid out by a hunter or fowler. The psalmist is pointing out all the traps and dangers that often catch us unaware. And there is mention of the scourge that rages at noon or the plagues and pestilence that stalk in darkness. Some commentators suggest that this suggests a raging epidemic with large numbers fatally stricken. In all this, we need not fear, says the Psalmist. For God “*will cover you with pinions, and under God’s wings you will find refuge*. Pinions are the last group of bones of a bird’s wings—a firm, strong part of the bird. It’s a beautiful image for these times.

The sweeping promises of assurance and deliverance in this Psalm have comforted many through times of uncertainties and perilous landscapes. When we face threats, many of us want to hear promises like, “I will deliver, protect, answer, rescue, honor, satisfy.” Of course we don’t always

experience the kind of protection we pray for, hence my tendency to argue with this Psalm from time to time.

It is indeed a scary and stressful time for many. We are in the trenches or soon to be in the deeper trenches of this pandemic, some more at risk than others. And even though we can't ever be guaranteed physical protection—accidents happen, diseases and pandemics take hold, wars rage on—I also seek to join in the Psalmist's refrain believing that God holds us with a strong, firm presence. God does and is providing refuge in the midst of the pestilence, dangers, strife and hostility that comes with life. And through and in God we might yet learn how to hold one another with a similar strong and firm presence, whether physically near or far apart.

May it be so.

Ruth Harder/Rainbow Mennonite/ March 19, 2020