

A Journey of Finding Faith in the Unfathomable

From Psalm 91: 1-6 (NIV)

1 Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

2 I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

3 Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.

4 He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge;

his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

5 You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,

6 nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.

Like many churches across the country, Servants of Christ folks have been reading Psalm 91 every day. For many of us, its words flutter with hope today more than they did when we were filling out our March Madness brackets ten days ago.

Psalm 91 can also be a little confusing. It is filled with promises of God's protection and that sounds encouraging and wonderful. But then I think of each number coming across my TV screen delineating those who have died in recent days, knowing that each number represents a grieving family. I also know the vulnerable are the ones hurt the worst.

Over the years I have learned to look at Psalm 91 with different eyes. As I have been re-reading it every day, my mind remembers that... no one in the Bible had a smooth-sailing life. No one. Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness. David had enemies everywhere. Elijah became suicidal. Look at Job... Israel lived for years in exile not knowing they would ever see home again. Poor Paul spent as many years in prison as he did out of prison. And Jesus spent a lot of time preaching about persecution. And don't even get into the traditions about what happened to the disciples. So, there isn't anything Pollyanna in the Bible.

So, what do I do with these wonderful promises when the world looks like it's falling apart? First of all, they were encouraging because the listeners were precisely living in the circumstances described above. That may seem quite technical so I will make it personal.

Some years ago I spent seven days on a retreat in a Benedictine monastery. I learned the Liturgy of the Hours and how beautiful they were. From 5:10am until sundown every day the scriptures were read and prayed. We did have some time in the morning for something called Lectio Divina, or reading spiritual books like the Church Fathers or Thomas Merton. But

breakfast was in silence and a book that was thought to be helpful to modern life was read during dinner.

Then Friday night came around. The dinner was salmon and tuna salad sandwiches, which I am not supposed to eat except in low quantities. Early the next morning one of the worst cases of gout I have had came roaring in my left foot. I had to drag myself to the sink. I also had to wait all weekend to call my doctor to get a prescription sent. The pain. Not to sound like a hero at all, I still descended the stairs slowly, very slowly, to go to services beginning at 5:10am. Chanting Psalms and wreathing in indescribable pain.

I think it was Sunday evening at Vespers when I learned to see Psalm 91 with a new set of eyes. As we were chanting and singing and praying and listening, I heard this loud and clear in my soul: Chris, the purpose of the universe is not your gout or even the pain you're experiencing. The purpose of the universe is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. All else will pass.

Psalm 91 promises great deliverance... if we curl up with the Most High, allow God to enter our pain and bewilderment. The wing imagery in the Psalm is taken from the altar in the Holy of Holies. Maybe now is a good time to take time to get reacquainted with the only One who can ultimately save us. God is good. Really good. You'll see.

Peace,

Pastor Chris McNeill