

Sermon for March 15, 2020 – Lent 3

Psalm 91

Theme: Safe in the LORD

¹ One who lives in the shelter of the Most High will stay in the shadow of the Almighty. ² I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.” ³ Surely he will rescue you from the fowler’s trap, from the destructive plague. ⁴ With his feathers he will cover you, and under his wings you will find refuge. His truth will be your shield and armor. ⁵ You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, ⁶ nor the plague that prowls in the darkness, nor the pestilence that destroys at noon. 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 observe it with your eyes. You will see the punishment of the wicked. ⁹ Yes, you, LORD, are my refuge! If you make the Most High your shelter, ¹⁰ evil will not overtake you. Disaster will not come near your tent. ¹¹ Yes, he will give a command to his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. ¹² They will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. ¹³ You will tread on the lion and the cobra. You will trample the young lion and the serpent. ¹⁴ The LORD says, Because he clings to me, I will rescue him. I will protect him, because he acknowledges my name. ¹⁵ He will call on me, and I will answer him. I will be with him in distress. I will deliver him and I will honor him. ¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy him, and I will let him see my salvation.

I am sure that the Covid-19 threat is on everyone’s mind. Being a new virus there is a lot we don’t know, and that scares us. Our government is encouraging us to take unprecedented precautions, the stock market is crashing, and the entire world seems to be in a state of anxiety-inducing flux. How are we, as Christians, to respond to these things?

On the one hand, a Christian may be tempted to respond with foolhardiness – imagining that we can ignore all government warnings and precautions because we think that, having God, we don’t need to prepare. Such foolhardiness is sin – forgetting that our government is God’s appointed servant, put in place for our good.ⁱ

The other temptation is to respond in fear – imaging that we are all on our own and that it’s up to us to keep ourselves safe. Such fear leads to anxiety. Worse yet, the devil uses this anxiety to try to separate us from Christ.

As you can see, neither foolhardiness nor fear is a God-pleasing response to this threat. So how should we move forward as we face the unknowns of Covid-19? We respond by turning to Jesus in faith – keeping our eyes focused on his promises and our ears attentive to His Word. *“In this world you are going to have trouble,”* Jesus once said, *“But be courageous! I have overcome the world.”*ⁱⁱ

Therefore, with Psalm 91 as our guide, let us find the comfort we need to prepare for this virus in peace – knowing that, because of Jesus, we are **safe in the LORD**.

Our Psalm begins: ¹ *One who lives in the shelter of the Most High will stay in the shadow of the Almighty.* ² *I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.”*

Can you imagine having the almighty God, the Maker of this infinite universe who has unlimited power over everything, as your personal friend? Can you imagine the LORD himself acting as your loving Father: being so concerned about you that he watches over you every minute of every day - ready to protect, defend, and even avenge you? Could you imagine what it would be like to watch a news conference about Covid-19 with the All-Powerful, All-Knowing Saviour right next to you? That would be pretty comforting, wouldn't it?

Guess what, dear Christian: you don't have to imagine this. What I described is your reality. The Bible says: *If anyone confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he in God.*ⁱⁱⁱ Through faith in Jesus, we have an intimate relationship with God. In love Jesus washed us from our sins, paying for every single one of them by his death on the cross. Yes, the LORD reconciled himself to us in Christ – having his Son pay for the sins of the whole world, so that whoever would believe in him would be saved and adopted into his family.

God loves you. Not only did He forgive your sins and procure your salvation through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, He also called you to faith through the Gospel. He washed you clean and sealed you with His Spirit in Holy Baptism. He declared you to be His very own child through faith in the Gospel. You are loved by God. Because of the relationship you have with God through faith in Jesus, you can always be assured that:

³ *Surely he will rescue you from the fowler's trap, from the destructive plague.* ⁴ *With his feathers he will cover you, and under his wings you will find refuge. His truth will be your shield and armor.*

Who is the fowler – the bird hunter – trying to trap and destroy us? It is none other than the devil himself! His net is the temptation to fall from the faith when we experience an epidemic, accident, or some other catastrophe. When a catastrophe strikes, the devil is right there tempting us: “Where is your God now? Why would he allow this if He is such a loving God? Why so much death and destruction? Will God really protect you?”

In the Gospel (the LORD’s truth) we find safety from the devil’s temptation. It acts as our shield and armor, as it focuses our attention on the LORD’s love and promised salvation. The Gospel reminds us that the LORD remains in control and is working in all things for the good of those who love him. The Holy Spirit uses His Word to remind us that He is God and that all He does and allows serves the purpose of glorifying His name. He promises to work in all things for the benefit of His Church.

And, as you focus on God’s promised, loving protection: ⁵ *You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,* ⁶ *nor the plague that prowls in the darkness, nor the pestilence that destroys at noon.* 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 observe it with your eyes. You will see the punishment of the wicked.* ⁹ *Yes, you, LORD, are my refuge!*

Now let’s get one thing straight: This section is not saying that everyone who dies in a disaster is a wicked unbeliever, who will end up in hell. Bible history shows that believers often have to suffer alongside unbelievers as God works through disaster to accomplish his will.^{iv} Not only that, but Jesus also says that we should never consider people who die in a disaster more wicked than we, rather we should take stock of our own need for forgiveness and repent.^v

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that “sin” in general is always the cause of calamity, for, if there were no sin in the world, there would be no war, terror, disease or disaster. The wages of sin is death, the Bible says,^{vi} and death is always punishment for the unbeliever. Therefore, as our psalm states, whenever we observe a catastrophe, we are witnessing God’s punishment on the wicked. No, I would not say that such and such calamity is a result of such and such particular sin, or that all the people who die in calamities were unbelievers. To say that is to go beyond Scripture and is wrong. But, it would also be wrong (and beyond Scripture) to say that calamity is not a result of sin. All disasters in which unbelievers die are acts of God’s wrath. They are revelations of God’s justice and stern calls to repentance.

Should we, then, be terrified when calamities strike – like this Covid-19 threat? No. Why not? Because even if we were to die amid a great calamity, God’s wrath has not reached us. While the death of an unbeliever is punishment, but the death of a believer is always salvation - regardless of how he dies. God’s word says: *The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.*^{vii} Thus, the words of the LORD are true: calamity will never reach us, even if we were to die physically in the midst of one. We never have to be afraid. And why not? Because:

If you make the Most High your shelter, ¹⁰ evil will not overtake you. Disaster will not come near your tent.

But how can this be? Doesn’t experience prove the opposite? Don’t many Christians suffer harm for the sake of the Gospel, or just harm in general? Isn’t the Bible filled with examples of disaster befalling believers? Look at the life of Job, St. Paul or Jeremiah.

While it certainly may appear as if believers live unprotected from evil in this world, the reality is quite the contrary! The Christian who trusts God and seeks his help never suffers true harm or disaster. How so? Because as the Scriptures state: *we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God.*^{viii} If some misfortune or evil befalls a Christian but, in the end, works out for his good, is it then really evil or misfortune? If it worked out for his good, wouldn’t a Christian have to rejoice and thank God for it? And this is the case whatever befalls us. God only allows that which is for our good to happen to us, and what a blessing this is to know!

¹¹ *Yes, he will give a command to his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. ¹² They will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*

Some people like to think that God provides each believer with one guardian angel. Actually, the Bible promises something far better: God provides us with guardian angels^{ix}, who are sent to serve us^x in all our ways. And what are our ways? A believer’s “ways” are the path the Lord leads him in, the paths of righteousness. A believer's way is always the way of the Gospel.

And as you walk the way of the Gospel: ¹³ *You will tread on the lion and the cobra. You will trample the young lion and the serpent.* The Psalmist is not just talking about physical animals here, like what happened to Daniel in the lion's den^{xi}, or Paul with the viper in Malta^{xii}. No, the great lion and serpent the Lord allows us to tread on unaffected is the devil himself.^{xiii} God promises us through St. Paul: *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*^{xiv} Yes, through the Gospel we are victorious over the devil. His temptations and accusations cannot harm us.

And why does God offer us such safety and protection against all harm – especially against all spiritual harm? ¹⁴ *The LORD says, Because he clings to me, I will rescue him. I will protect him, because he acknowledges my name.*

Listen, dear Christian, to what God is telling you! He says that since you love him and desire nothing beside him, He will rescue you from every evil attack and will bring you safely into His heavenly kingdom.^{xv} Yes, not only will God send the angels to protect you, but He himself will be your protection and eternal inheritance.

The LORD says: ¹⁵ *He will call on me, and I will answer him. I will be with him in distress. I will deliver him and I will honor him.* ¹⁶ *With long life I will satisfy him, and I will let him see my salvation.*

What a promise! The eternal, all-powerful God listens to us. In love, he answers us. Whenever we are in trouble, whenever we are faced with disaster or calamity, God himself is with us. He will rescue us. Regardless of whether it be for continued life on this earth or eternal life with Him in heaven, the LORD will rescue us. On the last day, he will honor us by raising us from the dead so that we can live with him forever in paradise, basking in the eternal salvation Jesus won for us through his life, death, and resurrection.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: this whole Covid-19 pandemic is certainly scary. How are we to react to the news we are hearing? While it is most certainly wrong to act in a foolhardy way – testing God by taking no precaution - let us not fall into the other ditch of reacting in fear. Take to heart the promises God offers you through Christ in this Psalm: you are safe in the LORD. Remain in His Word and you will remain under the shadow of His wings. He will keep you from all evil, and safely deliver you into glory. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Romans 13:1,4

ⁱⁱ John 16:33 EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 John 4:15 EHV

^{iv} For example, the Israelites also suffered the initial plagues God sent on upon the Egyptians, until God made a distinction. We can also think of faithful Israelites who were carried of by the Babylonians together with the unfaithful (like Ezekiel and Daniel).

^v Cf. Luke 13:1-5

^{vi} Cf. Romans 3:23

^{vii} Isaiah 57:1-2 NIV84

^{viii} Romans 8:28 EHV

^{ix} Cf. 2 Kings 6:16-17

^x Cf. Hebrews 1:14

^{xi} Cf. Daniel 6

^{xii} Cf. Acts 28

^{xiii} Cf. 1 Peter 5:8

^{xiv} Romans 16:20 EHV

^{xv} Cf. 2Timothy 4:18