

## “Shelter”

Psalm 91 & Luke 4

Gordon Wiersma 2/21/10

### Introduction to the Gospel Lesson – Luke 4:1-13

The story of the temptations of Christ is the Gospel text each year on the first Sunday of Lent – in Matthew, in Mark, this year in Luke – Mark is typically brief, while Matthew and Luke have more detail. In Luke the story follows after the baptism of Jesus, just before Jesus’ public ministry begins - and as the story unfolds, in response to the temptations from the Devil, we’ll hear Jesus quote scripture 3 times – all from the book of Deuteronomy; in offering the temptations to Jesus, we’ll hear the Devil quote Scripture one time: from Psalm 91.

Alright – this is a test – a test of the liturgical attentiveness system; which is to say I’m wondering if you’ve been paying attention this morning as we’ve gone through the liturgy...it’s not really a test, because you’re not going to get graded and I have neither the authority nor the desire to pass you or fail you anyway – it’s more that I just wanted to check with you in particular if you’ve noticed Psalm 91 this morning, if it has caught your attention at all...? Part of the beauty of liturgy is that it can carry us through worship in many ways other than words, so I don’t imagine you’re always completely attentive to all the words (which is true for sermons too, I’m sure) – and hopefully that means partly that you trust the content of the liturgy – but...any red flags about Psalm 91 today? Take a look back...we used words from Psalm 91 in the Sentences:

*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.”*

#### **that’s good**

*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.*

#### **...really?...**

*For God will command angels to guard you in all your ways.*

*Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.*

*With long life I will satisfy them...*

**...hmmh...**

And then we sang Psalm 91 – about trusting God, yes, abiding in the shelter of God...but also a promise that God guards you in all your ways, from all harm – and we even left out a few verses of the Psalm that pile on the promises: protection from pestilence, safety in the midst of battle - verses that also make it clear that these promises are true for the faithful, while misfortune/harm falls on the wicked.

So that's the test – wondering if you noticed that about Psalm 91 – and wondering if it bothered you...as it did me? Perhaps you liked it...protected from all harm, long life...this the reward of the faithful, while misfortune goes to the wicked – but I find it puzzling, disturbing – in fact as Jill and I were talking about the liturgy this week I wondered if it was even appropriate to use this for the Sentences – and decided to put Psalm 91 there at the opening only because I would look back at it with you in the sermon. It could sound awfully presumptuous deciding whether it is OK to use some words from Scripture or not, but I simply mean that they are words that seem to me to need some particular attention – and that's what I want to do – to look at Psalm 91.

I am keenly aware that as a preacher it is often my own issues of faith and life that are getting worked out through my sermons – I wonder if you know that? I do try to be aware of that dynamic in myself so that it's not too much just my own agenda going on, but that I am listening to the Word for and speaking to not just myself but for and to all of you as well. So I am aware in myself that Psalm 91 raises huge questions that I need to wrestle with for myself – it's personal; and also aware that they are questions I hear often from you – hear from many different kinds of people, faith-full or not – hear in the midst of news and events in our world. They are the questions of the 'how?' and 'why?' about what happens in life – the 'how?' and 'why?' of suffering and tragedy – the 'how?' and 'why?' of God's presence and action and power; questions I've preached on before and will again, since they seem to require a lifetime of attention.

And I've realized that what has pushed my buttons about Psalm 91 this week is that it seems in particular lately I've heard from many people who have had the kind of language found in Psalm 91 used as a weapon against them – or for whom the words of Psalm would feel like a slap in the face as they do hear them; people who have been told that difficult events that have happened are a direct reward or punishment from God (isn't that what Psalm 91 says?) – or people of deep faith who encounter suffering and loss (so wouldn't Psalm 91 question their faith?)...

So what do I/we/you say to that? I'll tell you what I say: I - don't - know. Those issues of suffering and pain that come undeserved, they are a struggle I cannot answer fully – not just for myself but as I see so many places in life and in the world that reflect those questions much more tragically and urgently than my life does. But “I don't know” isn't just passive resignation - it also means not accepting the easy answers, perhaps meant kindly but actually very harmful; and “I don't know” also means it's very hard to accept Psalm 91...an interesting conundrum for a preacher of the Word – for a people of the Word; and I don't think it's my place or yours to ignore Psalm 91 or say it doesn't count.

I looked at a lot of commentaries on Psalm 91- and it will be no surprise for you to hear that I am not the first to note the theological challenges present there (although some engage the challenge more directly than others); but I was surprised to find a commentary on Psalm 91 that I had not taken note of before – it's a commentary by Jesus – and it's found in Luke 4, the temptation story. In Luke's account it is the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final temptation – and it is the Devil who quotes Psalm 91 to Jesus: invoking the promise of God's protection so that Jesus will jump off the temple. It is an amazing story - in order to tempt Jesus, the final strategy used by the master of temptation is...to quote Scripture! Now I don't want to take that too far, but doesn't that in some way affirm our wrestling with Psalm 91? The Devil wants to isolate the words of Psalm 91 and make it alone a basis for living, and Jesus says...”NO!” Well, actually Jesus quotes Deut. 6:16, “You shall

not put the LORD your God to the test” – but what Jesus means basically is “NO!” – that using Psalm 91 to say that God is a divine bodyguard is not a faithful thing, and in fact to do so would be to be misled by a temptation that veers off the path of faithfulness.

So – taking the cue from Jesus – what I would like to say to one understanding of Psalm 91 is: “NO!”. The reality of our experience is that faith in God is not a get-through-life-easy card; faith is not an exemption from suffering or tragedy; faith is not smooth-sailing for the good and turmoil for the bad (even if you can manage to keep straight which is which). That is obviously not the case when we look at our lives and world - “NO!”. Such answers have been and still are used as the language of faith, but that is a temptation to which we are not to succumb...that will only lead us astray.

But “NO!” can be just an easy answer too – just “NO!”? – no answers, no YES? Well, don’t you think the writer of Psalm 91 knew life wasn’t so clear-cut? I do – so then was the Psalm written as denial or delusion or deception? I think it was written on some level as defiance – a statement of faith that points to the deepest truth of life – that we can trust God completely and nothing in life can change that. Do you think Jesus just said “NO!” to Psalm 91? Certainly not! I am sure Jesus said the Psalm and sung it and believed it...because what Jesus did was to go on from this point and live in complete trust in God, in the ways of God – a complete trust in God’s presence as the shelter of life that nothing can take away; which was for Jesus a way of living that led him to places of suffering and need, to paths of rejection and pain, a way that led him not to avoid death but to choose faithfulness even in the face of death – because after the “NO!” to using Psalm 91 as a platitude or weapon or temptation, comes the YES to God as the only source of trust and hope – comes the way that knows of resurrection and life.

Life is not a test of whether God is with us or not, or whether God favors you or not – NO! Life is a gift to be lived in the faith that trust in God is the

only shelter that sustains us and the only truth stronger than brokenness and death. We can spend a lifetime tempted to look to God for a get-through-life-easy card, or we can spend our lives trusting that in God alone is the shelter of life – a trust that calls us with our lives to bring shelter of body to the homeless and shelter of grace to the broken – to trust God’s ways of life. Pay attention to the prayer we are about to sing, it says: “God’s gospel shall shelter you from harm, evil and all distress...” – they are words given to us not for indictment or delusion – they are a truth that calls us in the midst of our questions to come to the table - to entrust our lives and world to the shelter of the One who is the way of life.

AMEN.