The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 28, 2025

Psalm 91

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

[Luke 91:1-6, 14-16]

They who dwell in the shelter of the Most High abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
They shall say to God, "You are my refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I put my trust."
God shall deliver you from the snare of the hunter and from the deadly pestilence.
God's pinions shall cover you, and under God's wings you shall find refuge; God's faithfulness shall be a shield and buckler.
You shall not be afraid of any terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day;
Nor of the plague that stalks in the darkness, nor of the sickness that lays waste at mid-day.
Because you are bound to me in love, therefore will I deliver you; I will protect you, because you know my Name.
You shall call upon me, and I will answer you; I am with you in trouble; I will rescue you and bring you to honor.
With long life will I satisfy you, and show you my salvation.

About 25 years ago, when I was knee-deep in babies and work and my parents were divorcing, the Holy Spirit decided to kick up dust in my spiritual life. Despite the distractions, I felt a real desire to go deeper in in my faith through study, religious practice, and prayer. I began to read reflections on faith, psychology, and theology, learning the names of Thomas Merton, Joan Chittister, and Henri Nouwen. And I become more involved at church, as a eucharistic minister, Sunday school teacher, and leader of a women's group.

It was stimulating and fulfilling, but I couldn't find a rhythm of prayer that felt authentic and substantive. The style of prayer that I had learned as a child – formal, rote intercessions – seemed lifeless, while the practices of my teenage years – extemporaneous petitions and praise – felt awkward and inadequate. So I found a spiritual director – an older Jewish woman who was also a Jungian psychotherapist.

In one of our first meetings, I hesitantly confessed my trouble with prayer, worried that this made me an imposter on the spiritual journey. But she wasn't fazed at all. She said, "This is not a problem. You do not need to know instinctively how to pray. It is all laid out for you in the psalms." So she Encouraged me to spend time each day reading the psalms in any order, letting the images and language sink in, and see what happens.

It was meaningful and exciting, and when I encountered Psalm 121, I found the prayer I had been searching for: *"I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where will my help come? My help comes from God, maker of heaven and earth."* It stopped me in my tracks. *This* is what my heart was saying in the midst of grief over the breakup of my first family and weariness from the responsibilities of parenting and work. It is a verse that since then, I have always kept close at hand, and even now, when I am worried or tired, it is what I pray.

There are many other psalms that are go-to prayers for me, and I trust that when I do not have words to express my longing or fear, I can join the millennia of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in claiming the psalms as my own cry to God.

Psalm 91, a portion of which we chanted today, is beloved all over the world for its assurance of safe haven in times of trouble.

The psalmist proclaims:

They who dwell in the shelter of the Most High abide under the shadow of the Almighty. They shall say to God, "You are my refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I put my trust."

And God answers:
Because you are bound to me in love, therefore will I deliver you; I will protect you, because you know my Name.
You shall call upon me, and I will answer you; I am with you in trouble; I will rescue you and bring you to honor.
With long life will I satisfy you, and show you my salvation.

Psalm 91 is also known as the Soldiers Psalm, and it has been invoked in times of global violence, deadly pandemic, and spiritual crisis, including during the bubonic plague and after 9/11.

It reminds us that God's presence is constant, dynamic, and powerful and that when the world around us is shooting arrows and terror and sickness, we can stay grounded in the knowledge that we are not alone. We can choose faith over fear.

In Jesus' time, this psalm was considered a powerful weapon against evil and was used by Jewish exorcists to establish authority over harmful spirits.

Two verses that were not included today are especially important:

God shall give the angels charge over you,
to keep you in all your ways.
They shall bear you in their hands,
lest you dash your foot against a stone.

Do you remember in Matthew's gospel, after Jesus is baptized and goes into the wilderness to face his temptations? It reads:

"The devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."'

For the early church, the idea of Satan quoting this psalm to Jesus was like the Dark Side seizing a Jedi's own lightsaber — your weapon turned against you. But when Jesus counters with scripture, he reclaims its power, saying, "It is also written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." You can imagine the sigh of relief and cheer for the Light Side.

Through much of Christian history, the 91st psalm retained the element of exorcism, and its words commonly

appear on amulets and inscribed on buildings.[1] Right up to the 19th century, legends were told of pious Christians who used the prayer to survive epidemics that killed thousands. But despite these supernatural connotations, praying the psalms is not a lightsaber or even a crucifix waved in front of a modern-day vampire. It is a way to reframe and reground our lives.

Because when we are besieged by brokenness in the world or ourselves, we are faced with the reality of our helplessness, our inability to control others, the state of the world, even our own circumstances.

So we pray, "God's pinions shall cover you, and under God's wings you shall find refuge," intentionally placing ourselves in God's presence and casting all whom we love and all that we worry over onto God's mercy. It is not a quick fix -- the disappearance of danger or trouble -- but a return to firm footing, where we can grapple with it, rooted in faith.

Psalm 91 promises not a world without adversity or grief, but a God who is with us in the midst of it. And that is enough. Enough to steady us when the arrows fly. Enough to carry us through wilderness and worry. Enough to give us rest under the shadow of the Almighty.

And when we pray these words, we join generations before us who turned to the psalms in plague, in war, in heartbreak, and found strength. They are not magic charms waved against the darkness, but faithful prayers that root us again in trust. In a world full of peril and uncertainty, they remind us that our help comes from the Lord, and that God's presence — constant, powerful, and life-giving — is with us still.

Amen.

[1] "Psalm 91 in every time and place," by Philip Jenkins in the January 17, 2018 issue of *Christian Century*.