

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name*

The First Sunday in Lent/February 21, 2010

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Psalm 91 talks of the “ways” or the journey that comprise our life and are the subject of much of our Lenten exploration. The Book of Deuteronomy talks of this journey as a wandering, conveying some of the helplessness we feel when our attention is turned away from God’s presence. In the Gospel, Jesus is led first by the Spirit in the wilderness, and later the devil led him and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. Life is ambiguous. There is no getting around that. How we choose to live in the midst of this ambiguity can either bring brokenness, or that strength whose source is God.

The psalm calls to our attention the dangers along the way that are sometimes hidden like the adder and other times as obvious as a lion. We meet these dangers in the career pressures of this economy that can involve loss, searching or just holding on. C. S. Lewis describing loss, in his case it was the loss of his beloved wife, wrote: “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.” A parishioner wrote to me this week about the helplessness of being without health insurance. There are family stresses.

Psalm 91 tells us how to make this journey and find our way in hope toward God’s promise. In World War I it was called the “Trench Psalm.” It was the psalm soldiers turned to, to get through the trauma of trench warfare. The psalm begins, the one “who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, abides under the shadow of the Almighty.” This is the same Almighty Spirit that at Jesus’ baptism descended upon him and under whose shadow he would forever abide. Similarly, God accompanies us wherever our way takes us. God shares in our joys and in our sorrows. Especially wherever two or three gather in Jesus’ Name God is there. This abiding Spirit is the energizing power of God that brings an overflow of strength so that we in turn can be there for others.

The psalm continues. God's angels look after us and keep or protect us in all our ways or life's journey. Angels are God's messengers and there are many among us who help bring God's message of hope. It is hard to be hopeful alone. It is hard to bear ambiguity alone. It is hard to endure helplessness without the faith that others impart. If you want to live life with the positive orientation of hope, with the love that gives coherence, and with faith – then we need to find a world-wide community that practices this. We need to go where the angels are. If we want to learn fly-fishing we need to enter into the world-wide community of anglers (only a slightly different spelling than angels) who can teach us the tradition and practice of that fishing. If we want to learn to ski we enter into the world-wide skiing community. What makes us think then if we want to have a coherent, positive and trusting life that we can do that on our own? It's silly. It is the dilemma of many young adults (and I might add plenty of older ones, too), reported *The New York Times* yesterday, who are desperately trying to connect with their spirituality while staying away from organized religion. If it doesn't work with fly-fishing or skiing, how likely is it to work with spirituality? We need to enter into the world-wide community of the church, where followers gather in Jesus' Name and practice faith, hope and love.

The psalm describes what happens next: "I will protect them because they know my Name." Paul gets to the heart of Christian community when in his letter to the Romans he turns to an ancient baptismal confession. If we confess that "Jesus is Lord," he says, we will enter into a relationship of mutual love and trust with God which is what it means to be saved. The Psalm speaks of being bound to God in love and putting our trust there. It is in this practice of the church, what Nancy calls performative language, that we connect with our spirituality. It is not just out there in the ether. It is learned as it is practiced in community.

Now the devil flips this psalm around with Jesus in order to undermine the trust and test the love. From the pinnacle of the Temple, the devil insinuates: do you trust the Lord enough, if you were to jump, that God would send angels to protect you? Or, do you truly believe that God loves you so much that God would bear you up? To succumb to this temptation would be to eliminate the need for trust and belief. The devil then withdraws to return three years later at the cross where Jesus will need all the trust and belief he can summon, where his vocation becomes clear. He will give of himself in love on the hard wood of the cross for the life of the world. Love does not desert him, nor at the end does belief disappoint.

How we choose to live in the midst of challenge makes all the difference as to how fragmented or coherent our life is. One elderly parishioner turned to me once with a twinkle in his eye and said, "Being alive is dangerous." His faith allowed him a sense of irony and equanimity where in the imagery of the psalm there are adders and lions of difficulty to contend with. Had Jesus jumped to the devil's challenge he might have found more certainty but he surely would have developed less trust. It would be trust that he would need at the end when he committed himself into his heavenly Father's hands. It is mutual trust and love that provide the spiritual connection for all of us. We find it in the worldwide community of faith. There with others we discover what it means to abide "under the shadow of the Almighty." There God's angels often in human form encourage us. In another setting, children taught a pediatrician treating them for cancer, that you can face a lot if you know you are not alone. In the trenches we grab hold of Psalm 91 and learn to make the LORD, who is bound to us in love, our refuge and our stronghold.

Amen.