

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Safe Places”
Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91
First Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2010

The theme for our Lenten observance here at DCPC is “abiding in the shelter of the Lord.” The theme is derived from Psalm 91, the Psalm designated by the lectionary for this, the First Sunday in Lent.

One might call Psalm 91 a “psalm of confidence,” that is, it moves from a specific situation of deliverance to speak more generally of a relationship with God that is utterly trustworthy in the face of every threat.

“I feel safe,” my friend said.

It was not what I had expected her to say.

She said, “I feel safe,” and when she said it, I breathed a sigh of relief.

My friend’s comment came at the end of a long, tumultuous day of roller-coaster emotions and events and was voiced over the phone in response to my question, “How are you feeling tonight?”

My friend had not felt safe in a long, long time. At first, I hadn’t understood, attributing her occasional unexplained absences from church committee meetings to running out of steam after long days at the office and taking evening classes at the community college a couple of nights a week. But earlier that morning, she had rung my doorbell before I had finished my second cup of coffee. Tears were streaming down her face. “I can’t stop crying,” she said. “The darkness is closing in on me. I’ve been crying for days, and I just can’t stop.”

She came in and I handed her a box of Kleenex and we talked and then made some phone calls and got some advice from mental health professionals and eventually headed to the emergency room. Now the velvety blanket of night was draping itself around this difficult day, and I picked up the phone to call the hospital to which she had been admitted and talk with her one last time before going to bed myself.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, expecting her to respond, “Exhausted...sad...scared.” Instead, she said, “I feel safe.” (1)

To feel safe is a blessed feeling, my friend would tell the Psalmist if she could, and he would agree.

Unlike the situation of my friend, we cannot know the specific context out of which the Psalmist wrote. According to some scholars, he may have been a person who had sought refuge in the Temple from persecutors. He may have been someone offering thankful testimony after a recovery from a serious illness. The psalm may have even been a liturgy offering reassurance to a king who was about to enter into battle. (2)

The context from which the Psalmist wrote doesn't really matter, however, it seems to me. What matters is the affirmation that in the situations of life where we know ourselves to be most unsafe, safety lies in our relationship with God. In the situations where we know ourselves to be most unsafe, God holds us in the palm of a divine and lovingly tender hand, and in this, there is blessing.

We surely need to hear a reassuring word about safe places in these days, do we not?

This week, a man who was incensed at how he had been treated by the IRS set his house on fire and flew his plane into an office building that I have passed numerous times on my way to and from presbytery meetings, and I thought about the workers in that building who were beginning their work day, and I longed for a reassuring word about safe places.

Yesterday, I sat on a pew in this sanctuary listening to DCPC members Ben Yuen and Dave Dudley recount their experiences in Haiti. Tears collected in the corners of my heart as I pondered what it would have been like for the children in the orphanage Dave told us about, children who had been without food and water for nearly a week. While I rejoiced at what Dave and Hendrick Motorsports and Missionary Flights International were able to do to meet this crisis—Dave asked us whether it “just happened” or was “a miracle,” and I would have to say that it is exactly the kind of miracle that the grace of God brings into being—while I rejoiced at what these partners working in relationship with one another were able to do, I could not help but think of all the suffering that existed before and persists still in that wounded land, and I longed for a reassuring word about safe places.

I walk the beautiful campus outside our front doors on a sunny day like yesterday and the pretty streets of my neighborhood, realizing that even the quiet serenity that I encounter there cannot create a truly safe place. Cancer has invaded one home, domestic violence another, brokenness masked by perfect facades. I walk the so-called “safe” streets of this town, and still my heart yearns for a truly safe place.

One might be easily seduced into thinking that a relationship with God will provide the safety for which our hearts ache...physical safety, safety from the hard realities of life. The Psalmist knew better, I think. He writes of a surprise attack, of disease, of violence and war, of wicked enemies, of wild animals. We can surmise that he himself had experienced some or all of these, so he surely knew that a relationship with God did not promise actual physical safety.

Certainly Jesus knew this. When the Tempter tried to lure Jesus into throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple by quoting Psalm 91, Jesus fended him off by retorting, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” If we are sometimes tempted to think that a relationship with

God will shield us from the worst that life has to offer, we only have to look as far as this rough-hewn cross that confronts us during Lent to be reminded that the One who was closest to God wasn't granted a safe place in this life and in this world, physically speaking.

What the Psalmist does offer is a new definition of shelter and safety. Eugene Peterson fleshes out this new definition in his rendering of Psalm 91. "If you hold on to me for dear life," says God... "I'll give you the best of care if you'll only get to know and trust me. Call me and I'll answer, be at your side in bad times...I'll give you a long drink of salvation." (*The Message*)

In other words, it is in knowing that we are never alone, but accepted and accompanied by God down the pathways of our life's journeys that we are safe, and, as those who have experienced it will tell you, it is a blessed thing indeed.

A film that is a favorite of almost every preacher I know, because, well, the protagonist is a preacher, a very human preacher, in fact, is *The Apostle*. I'm betting that you've heard many a preacher refer to the movie in a sermon, but I have never done it at DCPC and so today is my day! But it is particularly appropriate because along with Robert Duvall, Psalm 91 plays a leading role in *The Apostle*.

The scene occurs when the Apostle E.F., a Pentecostal preacher played by Robert Duvall who preaches the Word at The One Way Road to Heaven Holiness Temple, dances in the Spirit, and saves black, white, and brown souls with a consuming zeal while wrestling with some demons of his own, is enjoying himself at a church picnic and is confronted by a bully played by Billy Bob Thornton. The troublemaker wants to knock the church down with a bulldozer, primarily because people of different races are worshiping together.

E.F. opens his Bible to Psalm 91. He lays the open Bible on the ground directly in front of the bulldozer blade. E.F. quotes a verse from the Psalm and then tells the man to proceed. The man looks at E.F. and then he looks at the Bible. He guns his motor.

"You touch that church you gotta go over that Holy Book and, Brother, when you do, I don't want to be sittin' where you're sittin' right now..."

"Move that Bible," the bully says.

E.F. holds his gaze and doesn't move.

The bully gets off his bulldozer and goes over to pick up the Bible. Nobody in the sea of multicolored faces moves. The man gets down on one knee to pick up the Bible, but then something happens. He buries his face in his hands. The Apostle goes over and kneels down beside him while the crowd forms a circle around the two.

"I don't want to knock your church over," the bully says.

"I know you don't, neighbor, and I'm gonna pray with you and I'll cry with you if you want me to." (3)

The bully who had set out to destroy a safe place has instead found one for himself.

Today is the First Sunday in Lent. On each Sunday, we will be challenged to provide shelter, safe places for others, brothers and sisters in Haiti, Kenya, Nicaragua, those who immigrate to the U.S., and those who labor alongside us in housing initiatives such as Habitat for Humanity, the Davidson Housing Coalition, and others. But the place we begin is by knowing that we are provided a safe place in our God who lifts us up on holy wings and holds us close in love.

1. I have altered details of this situation to conceal the identity of the individual involved.
2. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "Psalms" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 1046.
3. *The Apostle*, October Films, Screenplay by Robert Duvall, 1997, 109-111.