

My Refuge ... in Whom I Trust

First Sun. in Lent – 03/09/25 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Psalm 91:1-13 Pastor Keith Besel

v.2, [The Psalmist confesses his faith,] **“I will say to Yahweh, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’”**

Introduction

✘ The book of Psalms has always, simultaneously, been considered to be both the first hymnal and the ancient prayer book for God’s people. And as such, it serves you and me here today in the Holy Christian Church, as God’s resource for our personal devotion and our public worship.

→ This last Wednesday, in the events of our Ash Wednesday service, you were brought face-to-face with the reality of your mortality as you entered into the season of Lent, having ashes smeared upon your forehead with the sounds of nails symbolically binding your sins to the cross as these words were proclaimed, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19).

I. The Reality of Our Starting Point

✘ That truth; understanding the true seriousness of our sinful nature as it comes out in our sin-filled thoughts, words and actions, is the starting point for the author of our text today from Psalm 91, for Moses just declared his own sort of Ash Wednesday reality in Psalm 90, prior to our Psalm here today.

→ In his prayer of confession to God, he spoke bluntly about the damage our sin has done to our relationship with our Creator. He spoke to God of the righteous punishment of death we all deserve, saying, “You return man to dust and say, ‘Return, O children of man!’” (Ps. 90:3). “For we are brought to an end by Your anger; by Your wrath we are dismayed” (Ps. 90:7). “For all our days pass away under Your wrath; we (notice it is our own doing, not God’s) bring our years to an end like a sigh” (Ps. 90:9).

→ And because of this inescapable fact regarding the unavoidable death of every human being, Moses asks Yahweh God to work deep inside each of our souls and “...teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12).

✘ Now in Psalm 91, although we don’t know who the author is, it seems as if he has certainly listened carefully to that prayer of Moses and humbly bowed before his great God with a contrite and penitent heart, so that Yahweh has indeed given him a “heart of wisdom” and a strong faith to be able to confidently face the real terrors of the night and all the dangers that darken our doorstep even in the daytime; to boldly face even the old evil foe that works in and among every one of God’s children’s lives trying to separate us forever from our Lord and Savior.

→ Yes, this psalm provides a powerful contrast from the one before it. Gone is the lament of death and in its place, here in Psalm 91, we are invited to a joyful, confident declaration of the refuge we have in the shadow of the Almighty – no matter what the world or the devil may put in front of us. So, you see, this Psalm today, is God’s gift to prepare our hearts, minds and souls for the Lenten journey ahead; as we go with Jesus, to His sacrifice for us!

II. The Old Adam Takes God’s Shelter for Granted

✘ Sadly, such confidence, such trust, is not our natural way though, is it? From the first day of Satan’s original temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden, mankind’s fallen nature has preferred to put God to the test. That slithering serpent likes to mess around with our confident faith; planting the seeds of doubt and trying to turn us from trusting to testing. He tickles our fancy. He’s fully in touch with all of the worldly resources that you and I tap into; using them to

twist God's commands and promises in the words of our friends and family; our teachers and colleagues, always seeking to plunge you and me into the depths of doubt and uncertainty.

- ✘ Back in 2012, Jamie Coots, a "snake-handling" pastor in Kentucky, died of – you guessed it – a snake bite! Coots was the star of a National Geographic TV reality show called Snake Salvation. He believed he had a special anointing from God that protected him from any harm from the snakes that he handled. And why not? God even promised in verse 13 of today's psalm that a man of faith will "trample underfoot" "the serpent", as well as in Jesus' words to His apostles in Mark 16:18, that "they will pick up serpents with their hands..."

→ So, upon Coots' death CNN released a statement from the network, speaking of his devout faith even in the midst of the dangers he faced.

→ Was Coots' snake handling really a sign of a man with devout faith, or was it a show of reckless behavior that misunderstood and tested God and His promises?

- ✘ This is an important question for all of us as God's people, because it speaks to the way God intends for us all to view and apply His Holy Word. Just as he did with Jesus in our Gospel Reading, the devil loves to subtly tweak Scripture so that it comes across as a great opportunity to test God and see if He really means what He says.

→ But Psalm 91 is not intended for us to "test" the Lord by looking for dangerous and irrational things to do as a challenge to God. That's a misunderstanding not only of this particular verse, but of the entire psalm.

- ✘ And Jesus uncovers Satan's twisting trick when he foolishly tried to get Jesus to throw Himself off of the temple, using verses 11-12 that promise that God "will command His angels...to guard you in all your ways...lest you strike your foot against a stone."

→ Jesus quickly untwisted God's truth and applied it correctly when He told the devil, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Lk. 4:12 & Deut. 6:16).

- ✘ But let's take a half a step back and make sure we understand correctly God's promise regarding the work of His angels, because He does indeed promise to protect us in the midst of all danger.

→ Some years ago one of our LCMS chaplains told of an incident that occurred while he was stationed at a camp in Alaska. During a blinding snowstorm that confined everyone to the army base, the chaplain received word that a soldier at another camp some distance away was very sick and was asking for a Lutheran chaplain. So he set out in his jeep, but after driving some distance he slid into a snowbank. He did everything possible, rocking his jeep back and forth, but he couldn't get out of the snowbank. Finally, he put his head down on the hood of the jeep and prayed, "Lord, if you want to take me now, that's fine. I'm ready. But, if you have work for me to do, you better get me out of this situation." When he looked up, the chaplain saw a soldier standing with him, who asked, "Can I help you, Chaplain?" The two easily pushed the jeep out of the snowbank. When the chaplain got up into his jeep and turned to thank the soldier, the unknown assistant was gone. The chaplain is convinced that the "soldier" really was an angel. There was just no explainable reason how a regular soldier could have been out on that road at that time.

→ Martin Luther said, "It should not be called luck but the special work of good angels when a man is saved from drowning or when a stone falls upon someone without inflicting any particular harm" (*What Luther Says*, ed. E. Plass [St. Louis: Concordia, 1959] 23–24).

- ✘ And Martin Chemnitz, a leading theologian in the mid-1500s who was often referred to as "the second Martin", wrote this brief explanation of how God uses His angels, "With one hand [the angels] protect the believers...and with the other they pursue and attack Satan and godless

men. ...As you go about your daily work, the angels carry you in their hands” (*Loci Theologici*, CPH, 1989, 1:178).

→ But all the while, folks, it is Yahweh, our God who is in charge; who is the source of every protective and guiding and saving power within, for and through us as His people. He promises in Romans 8:39 that nothing...nothing can separate us from His love in Christ Jesus.

✘ So, each of us should daily use God’s Word in prayer to examine ourselves and ask, “In what ways have I tested God with my reckless behavior, rather than trusting Him to lead and guide me so that I live and breathe and speak with a confident faith?

→ Do I truly take refuge under the shadow of His wings for forgiveness, or do I use His forgiveness as a crutch; as a license to continue living recklessly in the sins that I love and want to still latch onto? Look, I could spend all day listing examples, but friends you know yourself how to ask before you act or speak, “Is this something that would make Jesus happy or angry?” If it’s the latter, then repent and recognize the satanic schemes that so easily ensnare you. Don’t let your pride or stubbornness turn you from Jesus. Just admit your defeat or your weakness and confess your sins, trusting in Jesus and His unending love for you.

III. Jesus gave up His shelter for you!

✘ The sad reality though, I know is this: we don’t always walk away from these spiritual and earthly challenges to our faith as the victor do we? In fact, we rarely do. But hear me clearly folks, your defeat does not mean you are done for. That’s the blessed gift God gave to you when you were Baptized into Jesus, because you see, a Baptism in the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit is an inseparable bond connecting you to Jesus’ death and His resurrection.

→ That means it’s a Baptism into His victory. Take ahold of that means: you share in Jesus’ victory, my friend, no matter how many times you’ve been ensnared and defeated. It means you live now in daily repentance and faith so that every day you can enjoy the “refuge” (vv. 2, 9) of His victory as He pours out His gifts in Word and Sacrament over you in an endless flood of grace. This is the beauty of that means: you can and should daily admit defeat, yet you simultaneously live daily in victory; His victory!

✘ And what is His victory all about? That’s what we replay and appreciate here in the season of Lent.

→ As we see again in today’s Gospel Reading, Jesus, the Son of God was tempted “in every respect...as we are” (Heb. 4:15). Satan led Him to the pinnacle of the temple and tempted Him with the very words of today’s psalm, trying to call even His nature as God into question: “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning you, to guard you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone’” (Lk. 4:9–11). But Jesus did just what He wants you and me to do in response. He took refuge in the promise of His heavenly Father. He held fast to Yahweh’s promise rather than falling prey to Satan’s lies.

✘ Still, that wasn’t the real victory. Luke 4:13 tells us that the devil went away from Jesus “until an opportune time.” And when was that? When our Savior hung from the pinnacle of the cross. It’s there that the temptation intensified as Jesus looked down, struggling to take every breath that He took, at those shouting up at Him, “If you are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!” (Lk. 23:37).

→ But Jesus wasn’t there to save Himself that day. He was on that cross to save you; to save you from those habitual and addictive sins we talked about earlier; to “deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence” (v.3) of your fight with jealousy, anger, improper

sexual desire, disrespect, greed, gossip, self-pride, and idolatry in all of its forms; did I leave any of you out?

- ✘ Yes, Jesus trusted, even then; having given up the shelter of His heavenly Father, so that you and I would now and forever dwell “in the shelter of the Most High.”

Conclusion

- ✘ This is why and how we Christians now enter this season of Lent with confidence, because it is Christ’s confidence given to us. Jesus is my refuge and yours because He has given us His victory over Satan and sin; over all powers in this world and the entire universe when He shed His blood in payment for your sins and the sins of the world.

→ How wonderful that we begin these Sundays in Lent with this glorious psalm. But this isn’t the only instructive, comforting and strengthening psalm in Scripture. They all are of course. So, pray them for yourself, just as God’s people have always prayed them; just as Jesus prayed them. Pray them in the confidence that Jesus has fulfilled every promise given there.

→ Jesus...He is your refuge. He is the shelter God has given to you. It is He who spreads His wings of grace over you; wrapping you in His victory. And He alone is your salvation – today, at the pinnacle of temptation, and even in the depths of defeat. To Jesus be all the glory forever! Amen.