

Title: Invited to trust

Text: Psalm 91

Rev. Sharon Smith

Lent 1

The psalms are a prayer book and hymnal. The chapters and verses of the Psalms infused the prayers and songs that Jesus prayed and sang. The gospel writers quote them often - particularly in the hardest seasons of Jesus' life - in the wilderness, in the midst of his temptations and at his death.

And what a gift these poetic words are for our lives of faith. Many consider reading and praying the psalms to be a school of prayer. Giving us words to express ourselves in life's complex moments when there is no script.

The early Christians received their knowledge of the Psalms from the Hebrew Bible and from their worship in the temple and synagogues where Psalms were sung by the Levites. When we read the Psalms in out of a Bible you will notice there is often a superscription - like with stringed instruments or half way through the word Selah appears meaning an interlude or silent pause. The Apostle Paul's letters to the church in Corinth and in Colossae refer to singing and praying Psalms as part of their gatherings. By the end of the second century the Psalms were integrated into Christian's daily prayer - some prayed twice a day. Those who prayed seven times a day were able to sing all 150 Psalms in one week!
Well schooled in prayer!

Now we must acknowledge that the language and themes of Psalms can sit differently with us depending on the present moment in our lives.

Today's lection includes the praying of Psalm 91.

This Psalm may have particular resonance during a season of flourishing or after a close call with danger. So for example - we may swerve out of the way of an oncoming car, and exhale with relief and pray the words:

God - your'e my refuge - its because of you that I am safe! Thank you for guarding me with your angels.

That is after we have said all the expletives needed in the situation!

Or we may be worried about something going wrong with our finances or our health.

And when we get good news we may exclaim :

Thank you God for catching me, thank you for keeping me from falling,

In fact the Psalmist includes in the prayer-song every form of threat to human beings that's possible :

- those that come during the day, and at night
- Threats from inside the human body - such as disease
- Threats from outside the body - wild animals, environmental threats, war, death.

And this Psalm is written with such confidence and assurance that God will not let these threats near us.

And so there are many times when praying this Psalm is uncomfortable.

For we have all been touched by disease or disaster.

And in fact one commentator writes that the Psalm itself poses a danger - a danger of superstition - incredulous beliefs leading to certain consequences of an action.

So that the only way to know God is to know absolute protection from harm.

So what do we do with the certainty and naïveté of Psalm 91 and others like it?

Well, the Psalms are a corpus, an anthology of poetry - that is why there are 150 of them!

Each one invites us into metaphor and gives us words for multiple human experiences. It is helpful for us to acknowledge that at times the Psalms will not resonate with our current circumstances.

And yet praying them remains valuable. It acknowledges that in community we serve each other. Someone among us may be needing a particular prayer, when we ourselves may not.

And mysteriously, words also have a creative function. As we speak things, we can pray them into our beings, into our thoughts, into our hearts, in the presence of God.

(and just as an aside - there are many beautiful paraphrases of the Psalms that can really help us to enter into life lived in conversation with God in the 21st century.)

In addition, I have found the work of Biblical interpreter Paul Ricoer to be helpful in thinking about how I read and apply the Psalms.

In Brueggemann's The Psalms and The Life of Faith

Ricoer understands the dynamic of life as a movement. That each human being is struggling to keep an equilibrium in life. And that we move between orientation and disorientation.

In the hard times, when we are confused and life seems chaotic, we experience the extremes of emotions and with the loss of an orderly life, often comes the loss of language.

But humans are not designed for constant disorientation. And so we strive to find a new orientation or re-orientation. Where we let go old ways and move toward the new gift that is being given.

Understanding this and how language can function - provides a way for us to read the Psalms. These Prayers of our lives. Prayers of all of life.

So Psalm 91 is a Psalm for orientation.

When life is orderly. We can affirm that God is our provider.

That, says Ricoer, is reading with a first naïveté.

The first naïveté believes all things with a pre-critical mind. It can afford to do this, because everything makes sense.

If we have gone through a time of hardship or disorientation and then have been given a new perspective as a gift we can read Psalm 91 with a second naïveté.

The second naïveté is post critical. It has been through the pit.

Into a demystified world and yet it knows grace still intrudes and God makes things new.

This week I watched the 2019 British drama film called "the boy who harnessed the wind".

It is a true story of a family in Malawi (Southern Africa) whose crops fail due to drought.

The resulting famine devastates the village of Wimbe, leading to famine and government rationing.

One family is depicted as a family who believes in the mystery of prayer to the ancestors of their tribe. The father prays unceasingly. Waiting for rain.

The film shows how the family is reduced to one meal a day. They waste away and lose everything - even selling off the corrugated tin roof of their house for money for rations.

In this chaos the young son, who was always raiding the junk yard for car batteries, lights, motors and tinkering. Finds a book about wind energy.

He, against the will of his father, creates a windmill.

The final scene of the film - shows the water pumping out over the dry land. And the father looks at his son and gives thanks for the 'rain'.

Second naïveté - the crisis brought an unexpected gift. Grace intruded into their lives.

In a new way - God is my refuge. God kept me from falling.

The Invitation before us this Lent - is to be in prayer before the mystery of God. And to be just where we are.

To let the words of ancient faithful poets guide us toward new realizations about who we are and who God could be for us.

Ultimately we are invited to trust.
Amen.