

My Refuge and My Fortress
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Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

- ¹ You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
² will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.’
⁹ Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling-place,
¹⁰ no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.
- ¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
¹² On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.
- ¹⁴ Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
¹⁵ When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.
¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

Luke 4:1-13

- ¹ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,
² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when
they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone
to become a loaf of bread.’ ⁴ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.”’
⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil
said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I
give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ ⁸ Jesus answered him, ‘It is
written,
“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.”’
⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If
you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written,
“He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you”,
¹¹ and
“On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’

¹²Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

What is Lent? We won’t find it described anywhere in the Bible but we do find models for it in the Bible, including in today’s reading from Luke. We see forty days in our reading, and in the story of Noah and the ark, and forty years in the case of Moses in the desert. In all cases, it is understood that forty represents not the exact number of days but instead represents a long time, specifically a long time of preparation for something new. Moses and the Israelites were preparing for a new life out of Egypt and in the promised land. Noah, his family, and all the animals were awaiting a new earth, washed clean by the flood. Jesus was preparing for his time of ministry that would lead to his death and resurrection. In Lent, we prepare for the new life offered by Jesus’ death and resurrection. Which is kind of weird.

Moses and Noah and Jesus didn’t prepare for the same thing year after year – the single time they each went through a time of preparation, the outcome was new and the preparation had a clear sense of a purpose followed by the tangible outcome. Yet, not for us. We do this every year and, for most, in most years, it’s hard to say how things are different for us each Easter Sunday. When was the last time you came away from Easter Sunday services and saw the world with the eyes of the newly redeemed, newly saved, and, as a result, changed the way you lived your life from that day forward? If that has happened for you, I am glad for you. I suspect, however, that it doesn’t happen every Easter.

But we try to open ourselves to receive Easter with new gratitude by and through preparation during Lent. That preparation can include giving something up or taking something on that brings you closer to God, that helps you turn toward God more than turn away. Lent, frankly, can be considered a depressing season of the church because we begin it by remembering our mortality with ashes on our foreheads and we continue through it reminded of the ways in which we are *not* like Jesus. Scholar Katherine E. Amos writes, “Is not Lent a time of deprivation; a time of concentration on Jesus’ suffering and death; a time to face our own unworthiness and our sinful nature; a time to fast and pray?”¹ We read about Jesus’ successful rebuttals to the temptations of the devil, about the ways in which he chooses not to use his power to serve himself, the ways in which he chooses to rely on God’s providence over his own abilities, as he is strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

During a time of deprivation like Lent, it can be far easier to give in to temptation than to rely on God to help us through to the other side of the temptation. While we are trying to concentrate on Jesus’ suffering and death in order to more fully appreciate and grasp the truth of his brutal murder which he accepted for you and for you and for me, it can be far easier to leave the discomfort of that image, of that

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 32.

reality, by planning our Easter lunches, eating jelly beans, thinking about which flowers we might order for Easter, maybe even remembering back to the baby Jesus of Christmas just a few weeks ago. Faced with our own unworthiness and sinful nature, it can be easy to comfort ourselves by thinking we can't be so bad – God hasn't struck us down, we haven't been smote.

I usually come before you commending you for the ways you've gotten it right, this "being a Christian" thing, or encouraging you, and hopefully guiding you, how to get it right in the upcoming week and month and year. The lectionary texts usually help me out with this. But not this week. This week we are certainly in the discomfort of Lent with the selection from Psalm 91. We read, "Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." Yikes. Who among us can say that we have trusted so completely in God that we have been spared evil or even a stubbed toe?

Only Jesus could rightly claim to trust in God so completely and, in today's reading, he turns away God's willingness to deliver and protect him so that he might truly be like us. Our discomfort comes in hearing that God looks out only for those who have made themselves worthy. Jesus gave his life because he knew there was nothing we could ever do to save ourselves, nothing we could do on our own to bridge the gap we have created between us and God. If that's the case, and we know it to be true, how unrealistic it is that we could ever love God enough in the way of the psalmist so that God delivers us and protects us and answers us in every case.

Some will say that the psalmist lived in simpler times, without the benefits of science and understanding that cause and effect is not as simple as angering or appeasing God in order to receive wrath or favor. Some will say that the rest of the biblical witness does not support an understanding of God favoring us only when we behave but instead supports an understanding of God loving us despite the myriad ways we do not live up to God's hopes and expectations. I like both of those viewpoints and believe in them. But, in the season of Lent, in the time of readying ourselves to be as thankful as possible for the meaning of and depth of Christ's sacrifice, I'm going to set aside the feel-good jelly beans of the two explanations of the "if...then" approach to the psalm and I encourage you to do so, too.

While I really do believe it's true that the Bible as a whole tells of God's unconditional love and I know that even the nicest, most faithful people suffer, making it untrue that God must reward good with good here on this earth, I recognize that there is a part of that psalm that calls me to an accountability which I would rather not face. I don't trust completely in God over myself in any given moment. Herein lies the reality of Lent, the reason it makes us squirm. We are good people and we do

try to do good things and follow Christ. I am not encouraging you to beat yourself up about the ways you could follow Christ better – dwelling on our downfalls is just another way to take time away from trying to work beyond our downfalls – but I am encouraging you, and me, to acknowledge the ways we could be better, acknowledge the mistakes we’ve made instead of hiding behind the feel-good jelly beans, fooling ourselves into a false sense of our own goodness.

Whether you choose to give something up or take on something new for Lent or not, consider three things each of these forty preparatory days. First, we can always be better – you can always be better. Second, Jesus knew this. Third, Jesus still chose to be harassed for *you*, rejected for *you*, beaten for *you*, killed for *you*. These are harsh and graphic words, I know. There is relief from these words in the good news of Easter but don’t rush there yet – as best as you can, absorb what comes in these Lenten days before you jump to Easter. I hope by doing so you will come away from this Easter Sunday seeing the world with the eyes of the newly redeemed, newly saved, and, as a result, change the way you live your life from that day forward. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Humble us, O Lord, that we might be a grateful people, we pray. Amen.