

March 6, 2022 The Components of Lent Psalm 91

This is not a history lesson. I am going to use Psalm 91 to share with you what the season of the Church Year called Lent is really all about. Up until the last 50 years or so Protestants did not say a lot about Lent. It was assumed that that was something Roman Catholics, and Anglicans celebrated. To some extent that was an accurate sense of things. Where it was inaccurate, is that Protestants, Presbyterians among them, used the season of Lent to prepare for the celebration of Holy Week and the celebration of Easter.... The resurrection of Jesus on the 3rd day following HIS death on the cross.

So, technically, Lent began on Wednesday of this past week. It runs all the way up to the evening before Easter Sunday, so it includes Palm Sunday, and Maundy Thursday, on whose evening Jesus was arrested. It includes Good Friday. It includes the Saturday. And it ends as we turn our attention fully to Jesus resurrection, and what HIS resurrection means for us as believers.

Psalm 91 begins with a marvelous declaration of the meaning of the faith we celebrate together. I cannot put into words how thrilled I am that we intend to try and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus in the church, this year. Why is that important to me? Why should it be important to you? Here it is. Easter is not the chocolate festival of the year. I like chocolate as much as anyone! But Easter, focused on the resurrection of our Lord is a fundamental faith celebration. We gather to

worship on Easter morning, because of the discovery of Easter morning, that Jesus was dead, was buried but was seen alive and is with us and among us today.

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord , He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.” Lent is a time in which we make a journey whose destination is Easter and the recognition that Jesus is risen! It is a journey we make because we believe. We believe in God, we believe in Jesus HIS only begotten Son, who is the Messiah, the Christ. We believe God saves. Has saved us. Will save us. Our faith means we seek shelter in the presence of the living God. He is our hiding place. A place of refuge, like a fortress. In Lent we work at dwelling in the shadow of God. And what that means is that we actively seek HIS presence, to be near HIM, in who we have put our trust, in whom we have invested our faith.

Verse 3 of Psalm 91 says, “Surely HE will save you from the fowler’s snare and the deadly pestilence.” We know first hand about the deadly pestilence. Disease has taken the lives of more than 10,000 Canadians, and more than 3,000,000 people world wide. And yes this faith journey that we make in Lent focuses our attention on the fact that God saves HIS people. HE has saved us. Saved our loved ones. HE saves us from sins we have committed. HE saves us from calamities and circumstances where we hardly noticed our lives were in jeopardy. HE saves us. Jesus saves. HE saves us even when we die. HE taught Mary and Martha that “HE is the resurrection

and the life.” And it was not just a lesson in words or an idea. HE walked with them to the grave of their brother Lazarus. Dead three days. They could smell the body as they approached the tomb. And Jesus ordered Lazarus to come out. And he did. And Jesus gave him back to his two sisters. Even Jesus enemies, and HE had enemies and they were powerful, said to HIM, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing, if God were not with him.” (John 3:2). Those words were spoken by a Pharisee. Nicodemus, who served on the Rabbinical Council of Jerusalem.

But our focus this morning is on the words of Psalm 91, and the meaning of Lent. A period of 6 weeks and 3 days, during which we do so many things, simply because we have a measure of faith, faith in God. Faith in Jesus.

Concerning the salvation of God in our lives, the Psalm 91 proclaims, “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.” (vs. 4) The words call to mind several other Biblical images. Like Isaiah 40:31, “Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on eagles wings, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint.” I sat at the bedside of a friend who is dying of cancer. He was diagnosed with the same cancer I had, about 25 years ago. His body is finally giving out. But His spirit? Strong, resolute, focused on what God has promised him in Jesus. It was a privilege to be with him. Ted made one request of me. “Before you go, please pray for me.” And as I prayed, I thought

Ted and I were both sheltering under the feathers of God's grace. Ted was sheltering from death with the promises of eternal life, I was sheltering from the loss of yet another friend, with whom I had shared a major part of my years in ministry. Grief will come in its time.

There is a long passage in Psalm 91 that makes the point that our times and our circumstances are not in our hands, but the provision of God's hands and by his grace. By the simple reality of our faith in Jesus, and the Lord's faithfulness to us our destiny is continually unfolding. "God's faithfulness will be your shield and rampart." (verse 4) "You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day." (verse 5) "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you." (Verse 7) I call this, the sense of, I dodged a bullet that time. Perhaps it is my age, but I can think of several times when I was much younger when I took chances with no idea of the danger I was flirting with, and yet I came to no harm....not because I was smart....but because God shelters us, even when we are foolish.

I attended Synod in Peterborough. I had come south from Kapuskasing early because I was requested to visit people among whom I had served as a student minister while I was going to Knox College. Now, the Synod adjourned at 6:00 o'clock p.m. If I had done the sensible thing, I would have stayed overnight in Peterborough and driven home, a trip of about 14 hours, starting out in the morning. But I was bound and determined I was going to drive through the night and get

back home to Barbara. I pulled into our driveway at the manse in Kapuskasing early in the morning. I turned off the engine. And I started to shake. I had no memory of the last 200 miles I had driven. I remembered making the left hand turn at Cochrane, 80 miles from home but I could remember nothing after that until this moment in my driveway. I realized I had taken foolish risks, and gambled with my life. And it hit me that angels of grace alone had kept me from harm. That is the promise of verse 10..."no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent." And I have tried to be more sensible in the exercise of my faith ever since.

I said this message is really about Lent and Lent in 2022. We remember basic things about God's love, about Jesus determination and commitment to our well being in Lent. All under the banner that HIS concern, has always been about our salvation. I am therefore going to conclude with what I will call, beads of grace that are sprinkled lavishly through the final verses of Psalm 91. "Because he loves me, I will rescue him...I will be with him in trouble...I will deliver him and honour him...with long life...I will show him my salvation."

The season of Lent is upon us. It is a time for remembering what Jesus has done for us. Take it very personally. Everything HE endured on the cross had you and I in mind. HE said it clearly: "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Let us pray;

O Lord our Redeemer. We begin again this Lenten quest. Be with us through each day and night. Make us mindful of the degree to which you love us. The pain which YOU bore, the love which YOU shared, the death YOU experienced, YOU had us in mind through it all. Save us and make us new, eager to serve YOUR purposes and to love those to whom YOU lead us. Amen