

Reflection/Sermon – Feb 4, 2024

Under God's Wings Text: Psalm 91, Isaiah 40: 28-31

Psalm 91 is the psalm that inspires the famous hymn, On Eagle's Wings, that most of us love to sing, composed by Fr. Michael Joncas in 1979 because of a very close friend's father who died. This psalm is saturated with images that make us think the world was like when the writer wrote this psalm. A "fowler's snare" sounds like the land mines concealed under the ground to destroy enemies in wars. A "deadly pestilence" reminds me of the COVID-19 pandemic. Terrors in the night sound like a description of anarchy and lawlessness. Flying arrows indicate people on battlefields killing each other with all sorts of weapons. Thousands falling reminds me of mass murders or terrorist attacks. These words are pretty scary. The language is evocative, even disturbing. They present a world or a situation that is violent, fearful, deadly. Not our dream of an ideal world, if you ask me.

This psalm builds on the assumption that lies at the core of the ancient Israel's covenant with God: the assumption that faith begins with hope; and hope begins with memory. Where memory fails, the faith of a hopeful individual or a community is threatened: be it political or social, personal enticement of ease and comfort, and the painful experience of being subjected to fear, brokenness and abandonment. We are like that too. When we are in the midst of a crisis, we easily forget the power and grace of God who journeys with us. We wonder whether God's presence has left us altogether. Psalm 91 may be interpreted to describe the times in which we live. But a description of our times is not the main focus of this ancient psalm. The message of Psalm 91 is not "we are living in a time of uncertainty and fear" but this: "Yes, there is fear and uncertainty and yes, death is very real, but our faith in God assures us of God's protection and presence."

Biblical scholars have proposed several situations why this psalm was written. It might be a testimony from someone who has found refuge in God, or a thankful prayer by someone who has recovered from a serious illness, or perhaps a liturgical prayer by a king or a warrior before going to battle. It could be an affirmation of faith from one who believes in a God who provides protection and security. The words articulate comfort, confidence, courage and hope for one who

trusts God in the midst of fear and hopelessness. The writer also talks about God's faithfulness as being "shield and buckler". These are things worn by a warrior in the arm and hand used to protect the warrior from harm and death. The Psalmist declares through these images that God will protect God's people like a shield who will come between God's people and their enemies as promised in the covenant. This is the Psalmist's source of safety and security.

The psalm's imagery and language resonate with many of us who are dealing with fear, anxiety, pain, grief and other challenging circumstances. We may use this Psalm to give us assurance that God hears our prayers in this time of pandemic. But we must remember too that humans are not exempt from harms or dangers or pandemics or deaths. We simply live through these challenges knowing that we are not alone and that God will give us the confidence we need to face these human realities; that God is constantly available sustaining those who will seek God's presence.

One of the most expressive illustrations of divine love and care in Psalm 91, is found in verse 4, which says: "God will cover you with pinions or with feathers and under those wings you will find refuge..." In this verse, the writer pictures God as a mother bird, most likely an eagle, with large feathers and wings to protect those who are in danger. It is a beautiful image of a mother bird sheltering her young ones under her wings. This image runs through all the Scriptures as a picture of God's sheltering love. One example is the image in Isaiah 40 that pictures us being lifted on eagles' wings and having strength restored to the weak. These beautiful words were written for God's people at a time when they lost everything. Their homes had been destroyed in war. Many had died and others became slaves to a foreign land. They had lost their temple, their nation, their livelihood. They were disillusioned, discouraged, weary and brokenhearted. But the writer tells us that through memory, by remembering their covenant with God, the people were reminded that God would never abandon them! This is the Good News to which we cling even in our darkest, saddest moments. The last verse speaks of words we long to hear. "But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Fr. Michael Joncas, composer of *On Eagle's Wings*, was diagnosed with life-threatening paralysis in 2003. He spent months in the hospital recovering from the use of his arms and legs. During that time, he said he gained insight into suffering and dependence on God and others. In

an interview, he said this: “I learned that you don’t solve the problem of suffering. You enter into the mystery of suffering. And it does change you, and it changes your world.” For a while, he could no longer play the guitar, and when he’s tired he sometimes stumbles. But in due time, he recovered and continued to write music. When asked what he learned from his experience, Father Joncas replied: “I didn’t know my faith would be as strong as it was... Now I can talk about my experience of a God of rescue, which is very different.” He continues to ponder what God was trying to teach him through his personal suffering. He believes it was God’s way of telling him, “You aren’t in charge, you aren’t in control. Let go.”

Maybe today you are feeling exhausted, weak and ready to give up. Maybe there are things happening or have happened in your life that you cannot understand, and you wonder why. It is common for us to be tired and weary. It is easy to be discouraged and pessimistic about the world. Psalm 91 and the words of Isaiah assure us that under God’s wings, hope will come. To be under God’s wings means to stay in God’s presence. When we are under God’s wings, we are filled up, enriched, satisfied. We are at peace. We gain new perspectives, new directions, new visions. When we are under God’s wings, we find our strength renewed even as we journey on a painful, broken road. Let me close with a Franciscan prayer:

Where eagles’ wings lift to that place beyond fear
and where God’s still clear calm protects all from harm
and where God walks with all year by longing year;
it’s there that God’s perfect love casts out our fear.

Amen.