

OUR GOD, IN WHOM WE TRUST

*Rev Jim Allan
Camrose United Church
29 Feb 2004*

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 – You shall give thanks.

Psalms 91 – On eagles' wings.

Luke 4:1-13 – Jesus' temptations in the wilderness.

We all want Jesus to walk with us, including that psalmist who wrote Psalm 91 which is, as Garry [Gibson] commented, a beautiful expression of the power of God in our midst. "You who dwell in the shelter of our God, who abide in this shadow for life, shall say to the Lord, 'my refuge, my rock in whom I trust,' for to God's angels is given a command to guard you in all your ways, and I will raise you up on eagles' wings and bear you on the breath of the dawn." The psalmist was speaking to people who lived with many different kinds of fears, who lived through moments when they felt threatened and in need of protection--who felt vulnerable. Maybe the psalm touches the most universal part of human experience, deep in our guts, deep in our hearts. And the psalmist is talking about God in a hundred different ways--like an eagle, like the angels, like the spirit that guides--in which we can trust this God to surround us with care and protection, to uphold us, to lead us on.

And so it's a part of this marvellous spiritual tradition of ours that responds to perhaps the deepest need of the human heart which is the need for a sense of safety or security, the need for some way to deal with our fears. And I don't mean only the fears of big things like that of a soldier going into combat and wanting to feel protected. Fear goes all the way from that to our fear of making a wrong life-determining choice, or our fearing the worst when we go (or when a loved one such as a child goes) to the doctor with a mysterious illness. Or, what may be terrifying for some people, just the plain ordinary everyday thing of getting up in the morning and trying to make it through a day of pain and loneliness.

The psalmist knew those fears that are at the centre of our lives, and knew that what we need from God is that sense of trust and care and protection, not so as to eliminate the fears and dangers, but to assure us that whatever comes will not devastate or overwhelm or destroy us. I read something somewhere once--I'm not very good on footnotes (I forget where things came from), but I think it was a psychologist who wrote it--that human beings have three fundamental fears. One is the fear of death or pain, another is the fear of loneliness or abandonment, and the third is the fear of failure.

Those are all important, but I want to focus on that fear of failure. This is the fear of making a mistake, of doing something or making a choice that is terribly wrong. The story of Jesus facing temptation in the wilderness touches that part of our universal human experience of feeling we are at times in the wilderness. We have choices to make and we experience ourselves drawn in different directions. We know somehow deep in our hearts that there is a right choice. We also know there is a wrong choice which, if selected, could really be devastating not only for our own lives but also for others' lives

as well, and which we could regret for the rest of our lives. One of the greatest fears is being in a situation where we need to make choices and we think we don't know enough or don't have enough advice or can't see far enough ahead to make a decision. We can't be sure what choice to make, but we have to make one. Not to choose becomes a choice in itself, and that could be the worst option. Even in those moments I believe the psalmist is telling us that we can trust those angels to guard us and that spirit to lead us. This means we can even make mistakes, but if we are faithfully trusting in God, God continues to care for us and to take us along our way. It's not about being perfect; we can still be cared for.

There are many different kinds of wilderness moments in our lives. For some people these are moments of transition when something in our lives has been lost, or is passing, and we need to make a choice. This may involve a move to a new home; a choice about a new partner in life; or other important choices when we emerge from the wilderness of being between jobs or some other turn in our lives. We know these choices are so important and are setting new paths in our lives, and for some of us the complexities can seem like a bit of a wilderness. For some of us it can be very personal choices. For example, as you all know I went through a separation last spring and this is my first year separated. There are many changes of direction in my life, many choices that affect other people as well as me, and I don't feel competent to make choices that I can be sure of. And so I find myself very deeply dependent on God's mercy and grace and protection to enable me to go through the year without feeling paralyzed with that fear of not knowing what to do and what to choose.

We can go back to our collective lives as organizations, as cities, and so this is a message both for the first Sunday of Lent and for the day of our Annual Congregational Meeting. Many congregational meetings are routine to the point of being boring; but not this one. We have some very significant choices before us today. So I wanted to bring a message of this nature because there is a way in which it feels like a bit of a wilderness for a congregation to be facing a major time of transition like restructuring. We had a celebration last week or the week before. It was fun to laugh and joke about the way the Official Board has been over the years, and about the choices we have made. Underneath all the fun was all the caring of our hearts that has gone into the directing the life of our church over the years. We now have the prospect of some exciting new possibilities that can open up for us, and yet this prospect means letting go of many ways in which we have governed ourselves in the past, and making many choices about where we are going to go. We don't have the security and the assurance of having something tried and true that we can merely put into place and say "There, it works for everybody else; it will surely work for us." There's a spirit of adventure. It's an exciting moment for some; a frightening moment for others. And so I wanted to bring this message to us as a congregation so that we can go into our meeting after lunch today and remind ourselves as we walk through the doorway that the angels are surrounding us, that the spirit is guiding us, that God is protecting us even in this moment of making these choices. We just need to listen to our hearts and listen to one another and listen to the spirit and be bold; boldly make the choices that look like the right ones before us, and trust that to God. So this is a message for moments like an annual congregational meeting, for moments of very personal choice in transition and crisis, and for moments for us as a society and culture as we live through times of transition when things seem so chaotic

and unsure. We need only keep our hands open to Jesus who walks with us and guides us all the way.

We have that story from Deuteronomy. What a moment! That's the central moment, the central informative experience of the whole tradition of Israel. It was the Exodus; it was Moses leading people out of slavery. It describes a ritual of giving thanks for what God has done, but it is also telling a story. And maybe the most important part of that passage is the story itself. As Moses might have said: "When this is all over and done you are going to sit down and you are going to tell your children this story. We were wandering Arameans and we went on down to Egypt because we had nothing, and we became a great nation in Egypt. The Egyptians abused us and trampled us down and we suffered. But we cried out to God, and God took us out of there with a mighty outstretched hand, and took us into that wilderness and brought us through that time in the wilderness and into this beautiful Promised Land. And here we are." Now that's a wonderful story to tell in retrospect. You see, Moses wasn't there. He didn't make it into the Promised Land. He was talking in the future tense. He told his people they were going to do this when they reached the Promised Land. They were making these sacrifices to give thanks to God, and they were going to tell this story to their children.

And that is one of the most marvellous affirmations of faith because there were many hard choices and much grumbling. The story tells a bit of it too, as the people made their way through the wilderness, and even before that as they made their way through the chaos of the plague and the increasing and intense meanness of the Egyptians. Then there was the terrifying moment of actually having to leave, with the Egyptian army on their heels, and coming to the water and having to decide what to do next. There was much yet to come. Moses told them just to trust in God and the day would come. It's sort of like saying some day we'll look back on this and laugh, except that it wasn't quite that flippant. It was the same kind of thing, but saying some day we would look back on all this and would tell this story and give thanks to God. When our children hear this story they will then know who they are.

And that's a message for us as we face all the transitional times, the frightening times, of our lives--just to hear those words of Moses that say all we need to do is trust God to take us through these times. The day will come when we will tell the story, we will look back and see how the hand of God led us and guided us and protected us through it all. We will look back, and we will tell the story to our children because it will inspire them, and we will give thanks to God.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor