

## **DWELLING PLACES**

### **PSALM 91:1-2, 9-16**

On this Sunday, we find ourselves in different places. Transfiguration is behind us. Easter is before us, and we are only deep enough into Lent to feel the wilderness brushing up against our legs. It may be dry now, but it is beginning to rain. On Ash Wednesday, it began to rain, and the Spirit of God dampened seeds that were planted in the dust of the earth.

This Sunday is the first in Lent, and as I understand Lent, we are not stepping out of the wilderness insomuch as we are stepping into it (and, if you are anything like me, you have stepped in it before).

The Lectionary gives us Luke's temptation story, the one in which the devil twists Scriptures and Jesus refuses to be twisted. At the end of this story, the stone that the devil asks Jesus to turn into bread is stone. Jesus does not run for public office, start a world war or skydive off the temple just to prove that God's angels will protect him.

One of the Scriptures that the devil quotes is a Psalm: this Psalm, Psalm 91, which serves as the subject of Jesus' exit exam, because as soon as he answers this question correctly, the Spirit leads him out of the wilderness. Why would the devil assume that God would protect Jesus from dashing his foot against the stone (beside the fact that he is the Messiah)? Because Jesus has made the Lord his refuge, Jesus has made the Most High his dwelling place. So what if you or I make the Lord our refuge and the Most High our dwelling place? What if a person one of us dislikes does, too?

Luke's Transfiguration story may work better here, and by "better," I mean that in this house there are many rooms (and thus may be just enough space to breathe). Remember Peter's plan: "Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Jesus. Law. Prophets. Buddhists speak of the Three Refuges: the Buddha, the dharma (teaching) and the sangha (community). Christians

*Ron Gilmer, Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa AL*  
*1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C, February 21, 2010*

have been known to be Trinitarian, too. Is it possible that the house that Jesus builds in Luke's Gospel may be bigger than any one of us or one tradition ever imagined?

God's sovereignty is at the center of the answer to this question. Actually, God's sovereignty is at the center of every question, mystery and everything else that helps us to engage the world that God created: "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing."

Is anybody surprised that this is the first hymn on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent? Does it feel too celebratory or too triumphant? Isn't Lenten worship supposed to be dark and depressing?

No, it is not. Worship is worship whenever and wherever it takes place. Every Lord's Day is a feast even when it takes place during a fast. So if you have committed to do "this" or not "that" until the church is on the other side of Easter, please adjust your expectations accordingly. The magic number is not 40. It is 46!

Is it just me? Or does Lent sometimes seem too neat? Forty days. Forty nights. Six Feasts. Passion/Palm Sunday. Maundy Thursday. Good Friday. Resurrection of the Lord. Repent. Proclaim. Eat. Drink. Die. Resurrection. Repeat next year. The biblical narrative is rarely this clear, and life is even muddier, because out of the dust, which is just a drier form of mud, God brings life.

Since Wednesday, I have been thinking more and more about Lenten disciplines and have decided that different disciplines call for different time frames. For example, if you are committed to praying every morning, the fast that you have chosen is a daily discipline, but if the fast that you have chosen is to read the New Testament, you may be able to pull that off in a weekend (and if you are one to push deadlines, you may not even start before Good Friday, and please do not ask for an extension).

Each of us travels through Lent individually, and yet we travel together. Sure, our disciplines differ. We travel at different speeds. Some disciplines require solitude. Others demand that we go to particular neighbors and say we are sorry and/or ask them to apologize. Lent is a scary place to be, and

*Ron Gilmer, Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa AL  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C, February 21, 2010*

fear is enough to make any one of us want to search for refuge, to retreat behind a fortress or to hide behind a veil, but if God is our refuge and our dwelling place and God is everywhere, then it is possible to live in the shelter of the Most High and in the shadow of the Almighty, wherever we go and whatever we do.

The Spirit of God calls us to travel together, and traveling together does not require uniformity. If it did, who would want to travel? Well, I suppose I would, because of the places that traveling allows me to go, but even when I travel alone, I enjoy watching people, because I live so much of my life between sermons, and sharing these experiences is truly life-giving and receiving for those, like Abraham and Sarah, go when God says go.

And God says “go” throughout the history of our faith tradition. Otherwise, Psalms assuring us of God’s protection would not be canonized. If we dwelled in something other than the Lord Most High, subjects like refuge and deliverance would be beside the point. If any of us chose to separate ourselves from the body in which God has placed us, the final stanza would not apply, because the pronouns here are plural: “Those who love me,” says the Lord, “I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.”

Luke’s devil knows this Psalm, and John’s Jesus does, too; “In God’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” While it does not seem to take much for any one of us to separate ourselves from others, from our neighbors and our families, it is impossible for us to separate ourselves from the love of God. Nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

*Ron Gilmer, Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa AL  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C, February 21, 2010*

Since Epiphany, something has changed within us. Something is not the same, and it is not God's love for us but our understanding of God's grace. This understanding will change again, as we travel more deeply into Lent. In the stories that the church remembers about Jesus during Lent, Jesus' self-understanding and perceptions about him change, and this change has to be interpreted. At particular twists in the plot, Jesus struggles mightily. On occasion, it seems as if he would like to distance himself from the one who sends him, and so he prays to the one who sent him. How is that for irony?

The prayers with which Jesus is familiar, the ones that he was taught in the synagogue, are the Psalms. And so, this Lent, the series of sermons that I will be preaching here at UPC, will be based on the Psalms, but we will not be leaving Luke's Gospel behind us, because my intention is to set the Psalms in conversation with the Gospel, and then listen for what the Spirit says to the church.

Just as it is difficult, if not impossible, to know what Jesus knows and when he knows about who he is and what God sends him to do, it is difficult, if not impossible, to know exactly what he prayed or when he prayed. So this series will be an exercise in faith, not faith in me or in whether what I have to say is right or wrong, but in God, in whether Jesus could have prayed a particular Psalm in a particular place at a particular time.

Prediction: the series will become more and more interesting as Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. Everything else about faith in Jesus Christ does. Why not the Psalms? Why not this series? The Psalms drip with witnesses to God's grace: "More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb." The psalmist says this about the Law. UPC's history, life and work say this about the prophets, prophetic work and the pursuit of social justice, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims that both of these flow from and return to a God who chooses this earth as a dwelling place for the Messiah.

*Ron Gilmer, Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa AL  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C, February 21, 2010*

Now we are a little deeper in the wilderness, and as I look out in the world, I cannot help but think that there are those who feel as if they are much, much deeper. How does the person who is without heat and without shelter hear this Psalm? Does she feel that she is living in the shelter of the Most High? Does he feel that he abides in the shadow of the Almighty? I pray that they do and that they embrace the God in us and that we recognize and embrace the God in them. I pray regularly for the people of Haiti. I pray for you. Pray for me.

Here is something to take home, a place to dwell as the Spirit speaks to you. In her book *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness*, Nan Merrill calls us to remember that in this Psalm, Psalm 91, our relationship with God is defined in terms of being “sheltered in infinite light” and “abiding in the wings of infinite Love.” She does not speak of more or less light, only of light---infinite light---and light is enough. She does not speak in terms of love that is agape, eros or philia or GLBT or straight---only of infinite love. Yes, the devil is in the details, but, in Luke’s Gospel, the devil is incapable of climbing any higher than the roof of a synagogue in Jerusalem, and Jesus resists him, because he knows, among other things, that the Most High is his dwelling place. May this same light and love guide you now and forever! O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable God’s ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.

*Ron Gilmer, Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa AL  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C, February 21, 2010*