

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 17 February, Lent 1
Luke 4: 1-13, Psalm 91
“God my refuge and stronghold”
Rev. Anneke Oppewal



Last Friday I visited for the first time an ophthalmologist. Freke, my daughter, picked me up from a meeting in the city and drove me there and stayed with me while my eyes were examined from every direction.

After the application of a variety of drops and lights, and with the prospect of a cataract operation in two weeks time, I emerged from the building an hour or two later with dilated pupils. Of course the ophthalmologist had warned me that the glare might be a bit difficult to handle in the first hour or so, and on his advice I'd put my sunglasses on before I ventured outside. However!

The moment I stepped outside I found myself completely blinded and disorientated. It was only for a split second, but I felt utterly helpless. I'd shot out the door with my customary speed and had already put some distance between me and the building before I stopped dead in my tracks. There was nothing to hold on to, no rail, no wall, and the vague memory of steps in front of the building somewhere ahead of me.

Freke!

It was incredibly reassuring to feel her hand on my arm and have her lead me to the car: Step mum, and another step, it's alright, you'll be fine....

Half an hour later I got out of the car without any problems and found my own way back into the meeting I'd left a couple of hours earlier and continued with the day.

Thinking about shelter and refuge, about the imagery of Psalm 91 on Saturday morning, it was this experience that popped into my mind as an example of the difference shelter, refuge, can make at a time when we find ourselves vulnerable, disoriented and confused. In my case it was nothing very dramatic, and I knew, as I had been assured beforehand, that I'd be fine very shortly after.

But still: To have someone there I knew I could trust to hold my hand and keep me safe meant the world to me. And even before stepping out into the glare, to have someone with me while the consultation was going on made all the difference, even if she didn't say anything and wasn't part of the conversation. The presence of someone who is "with you" when you are vulnerable and insecure is incredibly reassuring.

I think it is this kind of experience we need to keep in mind as a starting point when we reflect on Psalm 91. The relief we feel when we find someone beside us at a time when we are vulnerable and find ourselves disoriented and not entirely sure of our footing. Finding a tree to shelter from heavy rain, or of finding shade on a hot and sunny day. Because it is the memory of experiences like that, when things get really hairy, that may give us the

strength and hope that we need to hang on and keep going in situations far more threatening and scary than that.

What Psalm 91 is on about is not stepping out into the glare after a visit to the ophthalmologist, however uncomfortable that may be, or finding ourselves out in a storm looking for shelter, or in the heat of a summer's day trying to find a bit of shade. Psalm 91 is about much worse, and much harder stuff than that.

It is a prayer that was most probably written in a time of deep distress in the life of God's people. A time where life-threatening illnesses and war were wreaking havoc and life, even bare existence, was precariously hanging in the balance. Terror, darkness, weapons, contagious disease, destruction, thousands falling on the left, thousands on the right, terrifying destruction all around. We may think of a situation like the people in places like Syria and Egypt are experiencing at the moment, or other places on the globe where sickness and strife are bringing ruin and devastation.

Psalm 91 was written to be read in situations like that, for people in deep distress, conjuring up the imagery, the memory of shelter and refuge as an antidote to what was happening around them. Something to recite to each other and to themselves, under their breath, through gritted teeth, privately or in the context of worship as a litany and confession of faith. It is about maintaining, in times of trouble, in prayer, that "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust". Maintaining, against the odds, against the storm that may be raging:

*"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.
You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.
Those who love me, 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."*

It's not to say that when you make the Lord your refuge, when you choose the Most High as your dwelling place, that nothing will ever happen to you. It is about hanging on to the trust that you will, eventually, find that arm to hang on to when you cry out, or that tree when you're getting wet and frightened by the storm, or that shade when you are starting to feel faint with the heat.

They are words that are designed to reconnect you, when you recite them, when you shout them against the raging storm, when you share them with someone else who is doing it tough, to help you reconnect with the memory and certainty of shelter and refuge in the midst of difficulty and hardship. They are words offered as a crutch to hang on to while you are struggling against the tide. To repeat, even when you don't feel it - especially when you don't feel it and you are lost, and vulnerable and insecure: "God, my refuge, and

my strength, God will answer me, is with me, will rescue me, will show me God's salvation, even when thousands fall left right and centre, even when illness threatens my life and the life of those who are dear to me, God will keep me safe". "I will be alright, even if it may not feel that way right now".

We have to imagine this Psalm being written, being read, to people who are battered and desperate, who have been through a lot and have no prospect of life lighting up any time soon. Of a priest, or a prophet, speaking words and conjuring up imagery that couldn't be further from the experienced truth of that moment, and still, stubbornly, maintaining, that that arm, that hand, that shelter, is there, and will, in the end, prove to be stronger than anything else. That angels will carry them through at a time where they have lost our footing.

What this psalm is not about is an easy life that is kept free of worry and trouble. Of the faithful living in a cocoon, free from all the brokenness and heartache life can throw at us. Living in the shelter of the Most High does not mean debilitating illness will pass us by, that we won't get tangled up in complex relationships with all the difficulty and pain they can bring. It doesn't mean that when you are pious enough you'll be safe from things that will threaten to break or even kill you.

It is about conjuring up the trust that God is there around you while you battle on, that somehow God will be there when you really need it. It is about holding on to hope against the odds, and reaching out, crying out for that hand or arm you so desperately need and not stop until you discover it is supporting you, because you know, you've been told, you've been taught to trust that it is there and that it is safe to let yourself fall into it.

The gospel story about Jesus in the wilderness tells that story, tells of that experience in a nutshell. Forty days and forty nights of loneliness, suffering, hunger and thirst.

Meaning, in biblical language, Jesus has been put through a fullness of days where his strength and health had been undermined and body and mind under threat of succumbing to weakness, illness and death. Fragile, vulnerable and lonely, he is tempted to turn away from the journey he has embarked on. A journey of hunger and thirst, of vulnerability and trust, of living in the shelter of the Most High, and trust his own strength instead. "Come on", the devil says, "satisfy your needs, cut me some slack and give me my due, embrace the gospel of self reliance, don't let your integrity stand in the way of a bit of political realism and practicality, and make your religion work for you!"

No, says Jesus. Bread, focussing on satisfying my own material needs is not enough, I'd rather live in the shelter of the Most High than have my life contaminated by the power you offer, by having my integrity compromised, thank you very much, and as to my religion: I trust God's angels will be there to carry me through when the going will get tough, but I don't regard my faith as a tool to get whatever I happen to dream up I want. I prefer to trust God will be there when God is really needed, and live my life loving God in the meantime, on the journey God has laid out for me, trusting in God's providing along the way.

We all know what that choice meant in the end. Jesus did not have an easy life where his every need was met and his feet never stumbled. Jesus lived life with all the ups and downs, with all the pain and hardship we know and worse. He found himself on a cross because of his insistence on being faithful to God in the end.

Wondering where God was, crying out and groping around for that arm to support him, that hand to be holding his, that shelter and refuge from the glare and not finding it. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?".

Jesus knew and experienced that feeling of utter loneliness, vulnerability, disorientation and lostness not only on retreat in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry; not only all through a life where he was misunderstood, attacked and met with sickness and sadness every day, but he faced death feeling like that and still insisted on trust, on letting himself fall into the hands of God in faith that even death would not separate him from God's love, God's care, God's presence. Amen.