

Psalm 91:1-16; Isaiah 40:27-31
On Eagles Wings
Hymns of Faith Sermon Series
January 5, 2014

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." Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you make the Most High your dwelling—even the Lord, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. "Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation." (NIV)

Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by my God"? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (NIV)

You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord, who abide in his shadow for life,
Say to the Lord: "My refuge, my rock in whom I trust!"

Refrain

And he will raise you up on eagle's wings, bear you on the breath of dawn,
Make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand.

Snares of the fowler will never capture you, and famine will bring you no fear;
Under his wings your refuge, his faithfulness your shield.

Refrain

For to his angels he's given a command to guard you in all of your ways;
Upon their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.

Refrain

(Christian Worship: 440)

A few years ago the “question of the day” in one of my children’s classroom was “Would you rather be a bird or a fish?” As I recall, the vote in favor of “bird” was fairly overwhelming. I suspect that if the question were asked here this morning, the vote would be similarly overwhelming. And if I were to substitute something more specific for fish—say, “flounder”—and something more specific for “bird”—let’s say “eagle”—the numbers would be even more dramatic.

If you’ve ever watched an eagle fly, you know why. An eagle doesn’t merely fly. It glides, seemingly effortlessly, as though carried by some unseen hand. It soars, attaining heights which provide views that must be stunning, views which make troubles down on the ground seem small and—to the eagle—entirely insignificant.

An eagle fears nothing. Eagles face very little risk of becoming prey, and anything that might truly endanger them—earthbound animals, fire—can easily be soared above.

I’d like to be an eagle, and I suspect so would many of you.

The problem is that we’re the opposite. Instead of soaring above it all, held back by nothing, we feel weighted down like beasts of burden—beasts of burden trying to move through an endless expanse of mud that’s two feet deep—beasts of burden trying to move through that mud with a broken leg—while a wind-driven wildfire races towards us.

And the number one thing that weighs us down is our sin. From the moment we were born, we have not been the people we ought to be, the people that God **demand**s we be. We’ve lied to our fellow man, we’ve lusted after our neighbor, we’ve leached off our friends, we’ve lived lives of sin.

And we know what that means. That means that the wildfire of God’s wrath—the God who described himself in the Bible as a “*consuming fire*” (*Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:29*)—is racing towards us.

Some people figure they’ll just try to outrun it. Good luck. Already weighed down by sin, we find ourselves slowed down and sinking in the mud of our own sinful nature, which creates more muck to weigh us down.

After some time struggling to escape the fire of God’s judgment, we ought to realize that we’re as helplessly exposed to it as a newborn eaglet that hasn’t learned how to fly. And instead of attempting to outrun it, we ought to seek some place which will shelter us from it.

The writer of Psalm 91 understood this, saying, “*I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress.’*” He then went on to assure us, “*He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.*”

It calls to mind a rather obvious picture from the Bible. Remember Jesus shortly before he died, looking out over Jerusalem and saying how he longed to gather the people of Jerusalem together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings? (*Matthew 23:37*) He longed to lovingly protect them from the fire of God’s judgment, but then he says that, tragically, they were unwilling to seek shelter under his wings, choosing instead to face it on their own, hoping perhaps to outrun it, thinking perhaps that the fire really wasn’t as bad and as all-consuming as advertised, dreaming that maybe they were equipped to handle it, or maybe too proud to admit that they needed shelter.

Don’t repeat their mistake. Instead, confess your sins. Admit with the psalmwriter that you need refuge, a fortress to protect you from the fire.

But here's the thing about the fortress, the protection that Jesus provides us from the fire. The protection is himself.

Now if you came to my fireproof house asking for shelter from the fire, I'd let you in. But if you expected me to wrap myself around you so the fire would torch me while you remained unharmed—even if such a thing were possible according to the laws of physics—if you asked me that, I think I'd probably decline.

But Jesus covered us with his feathers while the fire of God's wrath burned him to an absolute crisp. I would guess that some of you have heard stories about birds—maybe even eagles—doing exactly that for their young. Those stories usually end with a fireman poking at the charred remains and being astonished to see tiny eaglets (or chicks, or whatever) scurry out. While it would appear that such stories are urban legends, the Bible's version of it is no legend. Jesus really did cover us with his feathers, and we really have found refuge under his wings.

Therefore we can heed the urging of the hymnwriter, who slightly rephrased the words of Psalm 91 when he wrote, "You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord, who abide in his shadow for life, Say to the Lord: 'My refuge, my rock in whom I trust!'"

Of course there is one person who is absolutely furious about this development, and that is the Devil. He looks at us, children—eaglets, if you will—of Jesus, and he sees easy pickings. Like a fowler, he looks at us as tiny, tasty treats.

So he attempts to lure us away from the shelter of our God, places tempting, tasty sins in front of us, waits for us to walk out to sample them, and—zip!—snatch us up in his snare. It reminds us of the way he came to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and sneakily asked them whether they really had it made in the shade of God's protecting wings or if in fact God was blocking out the sunshine to which they were rightfully entitled.

How can you be sure to avoid the wicked fowler's snares? Ask yourself, "Is this something that God has placed before me, or is it something that the Devil has placed before—something that hides a snare?" If so, we leave it alone and can be sure that the psalmist was right when he said, "*Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare*" (or, in the words of the hymnwriter, "snares of the fowler will never capture you").

But that's not the only weapon that the fowler known as Satan has in his arsenal. He's also constantly stringing his bows, preparing his arrows, and firing away at our souls, attempting to wound us with all manner of suffering that might cause us to waver in our faith or even lose our faith. The psalmwriter described the wide variety of those sufferings and the constant nature of them, speaking of "*the terror of night...the arrow that flies by day...the pestilence that stalks in the darkness...the plague that destroys at midday.*"

You've been there. You've seen "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" coming your way, and you've felt your faith waver. What to do?

First, understand where they're coming from. They're not being fired at you by God. He's your fortress, remember—not the enemy of your soul. So don't start blaming him. There's nothing the Devil enjoys more than a good civil war in which you declare war on God. No, these loud and seemingly fearsome things are coming from the Devil—the Devil who is described in the Bible as "a roaring lion."

But don't worry, don't despair, don't even let your pulse rate rise. Remember, God is your fortress, your shield, your rampart.

We've already talked about the picture of God as a fortress. Let's look at the picture of God as our shield. When I hear the word "shield" I think of Paul's encouragement to *"take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one"* (Ephesians 6:18).

What is faith? It is reliance on and trust in Jesus as our Savior—our ever-loving Savior who continues to spread his wings over us when spiritual trouble comes our way. He does that by sending his Holy Spirit to shield us with his words and his promises found in the Bible. When we remember those promises—and his certain faithfulness to those promises, we can be sure that we are right when we read, *"You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday"*, and we can be sure that we are right when we sing to one another, *"Snares of the fowler will never capture you, and famine will bring you no fear; Under his wings your refuge, his faithfulness your shield."*

Oh, and remember that sneaky, venomous snake? Remember that roaring lion? With God as your refuge, with his promises as your shield and rampart, you will do as Jesus already did on Mount Calvary and especially on Easter Sunday. That is, you will not only *"tread upon the lion and the cobra"*, but you will actually *"trample the great lion and the serpent."*

Just as Jesus fulfilled the threat, the promise that God made to the serpent in the Garden of Eden by *"crushing his head"* (Genesis 3:15), we crush the Satan's slimy head and trample the roaring lion when we hold to God and his promises.

In fact, nothing at all can really touch us. The psalmist said, *"If [or "when"] you make the Most High your dwelling—even the Lord, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."*

Surely God's angels—who are at times pictured in the Bible as having wings—protect us every day from physical dangers, lifting us out of their path—or, if you prefer, swooping under us and carrying us on their wings out of danger. Why? Because God has commanded them to do so.

Does this mean that nothing harmful will ever happen to us? It does. Maybe you're surprised by that. Maybe you want to argue that painful things have happened to you in your life, and that God's winged angels didn't protect you from those. But I didn't say that nothing painful will ever happen to you. Rather, I said that nothing harmful will ever happen to you.

Remember what the overriding concern even of angels is. Their concern is for your soul—and therefore on occasion something painful may occur, but only because God is going to use it to keep anything harmful from happening to your soul. Yes, God will even use it to strengthen your soul.

Perhaps God will use such "trouble" to lead you to fulfill his words at the end of the psalm—*"He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation."*

Whatever happens, be sure of this. Neither the angels nor God himself will allow you to spiritually *"dash your foot against a stone."* God's angels will not allow us to even stub our toe spiritually.

And that brings us back to the desire we expressed at the beginning of the sermon—to fly, to soar like an eagle, to fly effortlessly above it all, to glide through life.

You can, and you should. Too many people don't. Too many people continue slogging through the mud of life, feeling very alone, very weighed down, even abandoned by God.

To such people God says in Isaiah, *“Why do you say...and complain...’My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by my God’? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”*

When you feel weighed down, earthbound—and eventually Hellbound—because of your sins, hear his words of forgiveness at the beginning of worship. Hear them again in the Lord's Supper. Hear them and soar.

When you feel attacked, spiritually worn down by Satan, place yourself into the palm of God's hand and soar away from that roaring—but gravity-challenged--lion, that sneaky—but no-vertical-leap-having—snake.

When you feel tired and weary from the grind of this life, when you feel like you are about to stumble and fall, hope (with a sure hope) in the Lord, and let him renew your strength.

Yes, let God lift you up on his wings from this moment until you experience a very happy landing in Heaven. Amen.