

Psalm 91

1st Sunday of Lent Year C
Night Prayer Sunday

This is a psalm about the importance of being under the protection of YHWH. There is no title.

The liturgical leader is encouraging the community to trust in God, whom he calls ‘The Most High’ (Hebrew ‘elyôn, עֶלְיֹן), ‘The Almighty’ (Hebrew šadday, שַׁדַּי), ‘YHWH’, and ‘my God’ (Hebrew ’ēlōhîm, אֱלֹהִים).

When the psalmist speaks of ‘pestilence’ he may have in mind an evil spell. The wings of the cherubim covered the space over the cover of the ark which YHWH had chosen to make his throne. God will invite us into communion in his life. Sharing the sacred space we will find protection.

We are not to fear these things:

Not even the inner chamber that held them protected them from fear, but terrifying sounds rang out around them, and dismal phantoms with gloomy faces appeared ... Throughout the night, which was really powerless, and which came upon them from the recesses of powerless Hades, they all slept the same sleep, and now were driven by monstrous spectres, and now were paralysed by their soul’s surrender; for sudden and unexpected fear overwhelmed them.

– Wisdom 17:4,14-15

Verse 4c is better placed at the end of verse 7.

God’s power will protect us. It is for us to trust God.

The eyes of YHWH are on those who love him, a mighty shield and strong support, a shelter from scorching wind and a shade from noonday sun, a guard against stumbling and a help against falling.

– Sirach 34:19

¹You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shade of the Almighty, ²will say to YHWH*, ‘My refuge, my fortress, my God, I place my trust in you’.

³Yes, he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; ⁴he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge.

⁵You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, ⁶or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that strikes at noon. ⁷A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you, ^{4c}for his arm is a shield and buckler.

⁸You have only to open your eyes and you will see the punishment of the wicked.

⁹Because you have made YHWH your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, ¹⁰no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

¹²They will bear you up on their hands so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder, you will trample on the young lion and the serpent.

¹⁴I will rescue the one who loves me; I will protect those who know my name.

¹⁵When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and bring them glory*.

¹⁶With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation*.

Verses 11 and 12 are quoted by Matthew in the scene where he speaks of Jesus being tempted (Matthew 4:6; Luke 4:9-11). Compare the following:

I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

– Exodus 23:20

I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites.

– Exodus 33:2

The angel of YHWH encamps around those who fear him, and protects them.

– Psalm 34:7

You will walk on your way securely and your foot will not stumble.

– Proverbs 3:23

See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.

– Luke 10:10

These signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons ... they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them.

– Mark 16:17-18

To this point the psalmist has been speaking about God. He now utters an oracle from God. God will care for those who love him, who know him intimately and enter into dialogue with him.

Psalm 3 and Psalm 27 express similar beliefs. See the following from the New Testament:

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

– 1Peter 5:8-10