

“Shelter in a Storm”

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First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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I don't know how many of you own one of these. I resisted getting one for quite a while. I already owned a cell phone. It worked well. I could make calls on it. I could get calls on it. I didn't need a smart phone that could run "apps." But I got one last year.

And now I admit it. I use more "apps" than I thought I would. In fact fairly about once every week or so, I push a button on my phone and head on over to the store to look over the new applications people have created. Some of them are useful. Some aren't.

The other day though, as I was browsing through the store I saw an "app" in the "top ten" list. Its title surprised me. It was called "pocket god." And beside the title was a description. "If you were a god, what kind of god would you be? Benevolent or vengeful? Play "pocket god" and discover the answer. On a remote island, you're an all-powerful god that rules over the primitive islanders ... Exercise your powers."

I won't read you the rest of the description. But I will tell you that your powers as a "pocket god" include ordering Islanders to serve you, or to dance for you, or jump into volcanoes for you. So apparently the only kind of "god" this "app" envisions is a "god" who uses power for pleasure. But the Psalm we read this morning encourages us to envision another kind of God, a God who uses His power for our protection.

Psalm 91 is a Psalm of Trust, like the 27th Psalm we looked at last week. And like that Psalm, the main point of this Psalm lies in its picture of God. Last week the picture of God that we saw in Psalm 27 was the picture of a "great big Bubba" of God who promised to be our strength and stay with us always. But this week the picture of God that Psalm 91 wants us to see is different because it's not a God of strength that's being pictured. It's a God of shelter.

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." That's the opening sentence of Psalm 91. So what do you picture when you picture a sheltering God?

In 2005 a film was released that helped me see that idea in a whole new light. It was called "March of the Penguins." Maybe you saw it. It was estimated that more than twenty million people did. And I need to be honest and tell you that I had to be coaxed to watch it. But I did watch it, thanks to Carolyn, and after I saw it, I will never think about the word shelter in quite the same way.

To give you a quick summary of the story, the movie's a documentary, filmed entirely on location in Antarctica. There, every autumn millions of Emperor Penguins abandon their summer feeding grounds in the ocean and march inland in single file to mate.

I won't give you all the details. Instead I'll cut to the chase and tell you that the female lays only one egg each year. And after the egg is laid, through an intricate dance, she passes the egg to the father. And at this point you've got to imagine you're not hearing me anymore. You're hearing the voice of Morgan Freeman. "Now begins," he says, "one of nature's most incredible and endearing role reversals. For it's the male penguin who will tend the couple's egg."

"While the mother feeds and gathers food to bring back to her newborn, it's the father who will shield the egg from violent winds and temperatures that can reach 80 degrees below zero. He will make a nest for the egg atop his own claws, keeping it safe and warm beneath a flap of skin on his belly. And he will keep it there for more than two months!"

And when I heard those lines in the movie, I had a flashback; a flashback to the words of Psalm 91. "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty ... and under His wings you will find refuge ..."

You see the picture this Psalm wants to paint for us is the picture of a sheltering God. Like the father penguin who shelters his offspring, God shelters us too. He shelters us under His wings, the Psalm says. He shelters us with His presence and His power. And He shelters us more than we probably ever realize.

Think back over your life. Think back with me and you'll see what I mean. When I was five years old, I went on a late summer vacation with my family. And because it was only going to be a short vacation, we didn't take our tent and camp out like we usually did. We stayed in a motel. I remember driving up to the office and all the time my father was inside registering, my younger brother and I were in the back seat of our car looking, looking longingly at the swimming pool.

When we reached our room, we got into our suitcases and put on our suits. And for some reason, we got out the door before anyone could tell us to wait. When we reached the pool I said to my little brother, "You wait for Mom and Dad. I'm going to jump in." And I did. The only problem was I didn't know how to swim. The only swimming pool I'd ever gone swimming in was the one at a city park near our house. It was a pool designed for small children. It was only two or three feet deep.

But this pool had a deep end, and I can still remember sinking down and down without my feet ever touching the bottom. I was surprised. I was scared. And I remember looking up through the water and seeing my father. He had run to the pool apparently just after I had dived in.

The next second, he was in the water with me, clothes and all. He grabbed me, put me under his arm, and swam up above the water. He sat me on the edge of the pool and climbed out and made sure I was alright. And when he knew I was he told me I certainly would have died if he hadn't noticed what I'd done and come after me.

And I wish I could say that's the only time I can remember when I felt like I was ever really in a danger in my life. But it isn't. And I know you have memories like mine, because we all have memories like that. And the Psalmist did too. That's why he recalls some of them in the middle of the Psalm.

He talks about the "terror of the night." That's one of his memories "The arrow that flies by day." That's another. "The plague that destroys." That's still another. And the list goes on. But the point's clear, isn't it? The person who wrote this Psalm, whether it was David or someone else, has been through some dangerous moments in his life.

But now, looking back on them, he remembers not simply the danger. He remembers the God who sheltered him, who took Him under His wing at those

moments. And he remembers more. He remembers how it happened, how he found God's sheltering presence when he most needed to find it. He remembers it happened as he called out.

What was he said? Oh that's right. "If they say of the Lord, 'He's my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.'" That's what he said according to verse 2 and he recommends that we learn how to say the same thing, to pray the same prayer, to learn how to call out to the God who wants to be our shelter in the storm.

And when we do that. When we speak the words out loud or even when we only form the words in our thoughts, they reach the ears of One who hears our every word and knows our every thought. They form a prayer of trust, the Psalm says, directed to a God who wants to respond, a God who desires to shelter us.

"They will call on me," God says to us in the closing words of Psalm 91; "They will call on me, and I will answer them. I will be with them in trouble. I will deliver them and honor them."

And my friends that's God's promise to us, God's threefold promise to all who learn to pray the words of Psalm 91. God promises to answer us. God promises to be with us. And God promises to deliver us and honor our trust in Him.

And because Jesus knew God's promises, he prayed them out John says in John 17. He prayed that his disciples would be "kept safe," he said, "by the power of the name." And the name he was thinking about when he said that, my friends, is the name of God that's found in Psalm 91. "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High," the Psalm says, "will rest in the shadow of the Almighty."

An actor named Jimmy Stewart found out about that name too. He found out about the power of the name in Psalm 91 in the middle of World War II. In 1941 he enlisted in the Army Air Corps. And as he was getting ready to go overseas. his father Alex wrote him a note, a note he wrote for his son to read en route to his duty station. So after he shipped out to the front, Jimmy Stewart took out the letter his father had written to him and read these words.

"My dear Jim boy. Soon after you read this letter, you'll be on your way to the worst sort of danger. So Jim, I'm banking on the enclosed copy of the 91st

Psalm ... I am staking my faith in these words. I feel sure God will lead you through ... I can say no more. I only continue to pray ... I love you more than I can tell you. Dad."

As a veteran of the Spanish-American War, Alex knew the power of the name in Psalm 91. He had used it in his own life, and now he was giving it to his son. And when Jimmy Stewart returned home in 1945, a decorated veteran of more than 20 missions flown behind enemy lines, he wrote to his father. "What a promise," he wrote, "to give to an airman. I placed it in my hands often. And as the psalmist promised, I felt myself borne up."

So where do you need to find shelter this morning? What's the storm you need to escape? What's the situation that's going on for you right now that's causing you to realize you can't handle this on your own. Where is your life in danger physically, emotionally, or even economically? Where do you need to find shelter from the storm?

Wherever it is, whatever it is for you this morning, know this. God is speaking to you this morning. He's speaking to you through the words of the 91st Psalm and He's hoping you'll speak the words back to Him, the words He's given you to remind yourself of the kind of God He really is. Remember His promises. "They will call on me and I will answer them. I will be with them in trouble. I will deliver them and honor them."

So call my friends. Call on the sheltering God who invites you to discover Him today. Maybe you've never called on Him to shelter you before. Maybe you have but it's been awhile. But listen to me. It doesn't matter. God's great desire according to Psalm 91 is simply to have us realize who He is and to start calling on him. And His great hope is that we will learn how to call on Him more and more. So learn how to use the words of 91st Psalm in your life. Because the more you do, the more you'll discover what it means to "dwell under the shelter of the Most High."

Let's pray ...