

TROUBLED HEARTS
When We're Afraid - Psalm 91
Rev. Hannah Coe - First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri
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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/troubled-hearts-when-i-am-afraid/>

It is the middle of the night. A man sits awake. Gripped by fear and grief. His anguish and distress is so intense that his thoughts are storming and he cannot catch his breath. The walls of room he's in feel as though they are closing in on him and so he stumbles outside to the place he often goes to pray. He falls to the ground, sweating and crying. All he knows to do is to put his hands and his face to the earth and cry out to God.

He calls for his best friends. "Please, stay up with me and keep watch while I pray." But they do not understand. They cannot stay awake. They want to help him. They really do. But they cannot carry his burden or shield him from the terror.

Three times, he cries out to God: O Lord, if at all possible, please let this cup pass from me. There is no word from God. This cup will not pass from him. Three times, he turns to see his friends asleep. There is no word from his friends. He walks the next leg of the journey alone.

He will face not only this terror that stalks in the night coming to cuff him and haul him off to a sham trial, he will face the destruction that wastes at noonday.¹ Less than twelve hours later, at high noon, he cries out again, this time from the words of Psalm 22, this time from the cross, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me...?"

In this moment of God-forsakenness surely the internal voices yell as loudly at the mockers at the foot of his cross. God, are you real? God, have you abandoned me? God, if you are all-powerful and all-loving how could you let this happen?

A wayward and troubled man stands alone in the wilderness. He tends his father-in-law's sheep most of his days. He never did belong in his hometown; even in his own family, he never did fit in. He had issues with anger. He murdered a man. Then he fled for his life to escape the death penalty. He settled in a new town where no one knew his name. He married a good woman from a good family. He made peace with his past fears and sorrows for what they were. Long ago and far away.

But God had other plans for this man. Not only did God want him to return home, God wanted him to confront his adoptive brother who happened to be the Pharaoh of Egypt. Not only did God want him to confront brother Pharaoh, God wanted him to demand that Pharaoh "let God's people go."

¹ Psalm 91:5

But this man knows he is the wrong person for this job. He tells God “no.” The last time he tried to engage an issue of Egyptian/Hebrew injustice, he ended up murdering a man. He cannot trust himself to be in his hometown. He knew he did not have a voice among the Egyptians and yet here God is, commanding him to go and demand that Pharaoh give away all of his free labor. He did not have a voice among the Hebrews and yet, here God is, commanding him to assemble the leaders of Israel and announce that freedom is coming. The man argues that not only is he unqualified and un-positioned to speak with such authority, he’s really not very good at speaking at all. So God will need to send someone else. Thank you, but no.

Like all of us, Moses tries to do anything, anything other than follow God’s call. But in the end, like so many of us, in all his trying, he is not able to do anything else.

Trembling, quivering, his staff shaking in his hand, Moses demands an audience with Pharaoh, he watches in horrified amazement the casualties of this clash between Almighty God and Almighty Pharaoh, and finally, he leads the Israelites into the desert, into a future and a place he knows he will not see in his lifetime.

Quivering, trembling, shaking we too have experienced God stirring and urging in ways that feel awfully risky. Standing in front of burning bushes, we’ve wondered if we are crazy, if we are doing the right thing. We too have stepped out in faith with no five-year plan, no cash-on-hand, no precedent to follow. We too have insisted to God and to ourselves that we are not up to the task.

Our Psalm for today is from book four of the Psalter’s five books and is filled with references to Moses and Israel’s wandering in the desert, vulnerable and afraid, hungry and thirstt. Moses is referred to in five of the sixteen chapters in this book of the Psalms; compared to only once in the other four books of the Psalter.²

Moses and the Israelites are not directly named in Psalm 91, but it is no stretch to imagine the terrors, dangers, and catastrophes they faced in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. They lived in a constant state of threat, vulnerable to wild beasts like the lion and the serpent, vulnerable to the military incursion. They were not exactly a military superpower. They were a small band of escaped slaves. They did not have a king or gold or world-class military. They were particularly vulnerable to every terror named in Psalm 91.

At first glance, it appears the terrors listed in Psalm 91 exist only in the wilderness—wild beasts, mysterious illness, stones, and eagles—do we share the same fears and anxieties today?

Psalm 91 precisely names the fears and anxieties we face everyday: harmful words; cunning, underhanded dealings; being set up to fail, blamed for something we didn’t do, or treated unjustly; suddenly losing what we love most; making a big mistake; broken relationships; not

² Nancy L. deClaise-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel*, (Chalice Press: St. Louis) 2004, 99.

being able to provide for our family; a phone call bearing news of disease—COVID or cancer—some other unanticipated catastrophe.³

Psalms 91 highlights what we understand today to be emotional or medical concerns—the breakdown of relationship with our spouse, children, or extended family; sudden, unexplained death in the night—but in the Ancient Near East, these were attributed to various demonic or nefarious spiritual forces.

Fear is not an altogether unhealthy thing. It has served us well throughout human experience. It is one of the reasons we exist today because it alerts us to danger, pain, or threat.

And yet, we still wonder if fear means we are unfaithful—failing to love and trust God.

Maybe you've heard the saying "the opposite of faith is not doubt—it's fear."

I have come to wrestle deeply with the idea that faith and fear are somehow opposites, as if they are mutually exclusive, as if they can't share the same space. Don't we more often than not experience faith and fear at the same time?

Jesus praying in the garden, Moses standing before Pharaoh, the mothers and fathers of our faith who laid down their very lives—sweat drops of blood, legs shaking, voices quivering enduring, persevering in the midst of fear for the sake of Christ and the coming of his kingdom. I doubt if any of these ever acted in faith without fear. They were fearfully faithful.

What is asked of the faithful by Psalm 91 is not that we somehow get over our fear or live in evasion of fear but rather if we are willing to find a home in God in the midst of fearful faithfulness. Will we choose to love God and allow God to love us, intimately and personally in the midst of our fear? Love and trust do not come easily in times of fear.

In Matthew 23, knowing with certainty that his life would be taken through cunning, underhanded dealings, treacherous plots, and false accusations, Jesus cried, "Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How I have longed to pull you into the safe shelter beneath my wings. But you simply would not let me."

In this year that feels like a decade, our deepest fears feel close. We find ourselves awake in the night, crying and tired of crying, thinking and tired of thinking, shaking in our boots, praying that God would spare us, that God would send someone else, even stumbling into the garden, shaking our fists at the night sky and yelling "how could you let this happen, God?"

³ Alyce M. McKenzie, "Psalm 91:1-6;14-16", *Feasting on the Word: Year C., Volume 4, Season After Pentecost 2*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville) 2010, 105-109.

And all the while, the voice of the Almighty cries within and around us, amid the pestilence that stalks in darkness and the destruction that wastes at noonday, “My child, my child, will you let me be your refuge and strength? Will you let me love and shelter you?”

God longs to be near and known by us in the midst of life’s fears and anxieties. God yearns to be the full-coverage shield buffering our bodies, minds, and our souls.⁴ Like any loving mother at the end of a long and terrible day at school, God deeply desires to get us home and get us fed, then wrap us up and snuggle us on the couch—long enough to strengthen us and encourage us to get out there and keep going.

Whether you are faithful, fearfully faithful, or simply faithless, hear this: We find our security not in *our* faith. We find our security in the faithfulness of God. Sheltering, strengthening, loving, providing. What if the most faithful thing we can do when we feel overwhelmed by fear is crawl into God’s lap and allow God to be faithful for us?

Those who love me, says the Lord,
I will protect.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will be their rescue and their honor.
I will be their satisfaction and salvation.

Amen and Amen.

⁴ Donald K. McKim, “Psalm 91:1-6;14-16”, *Feasting on the Word: Year C., Volume 4, Season After Pentecost 2*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville) 2010, 104-108.