

What in the World is the Church to Do? The Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God

Psalm 91

Collegiate Presbyterian Church

January 30, 2011

Introduction

Bible Reading Psalm 91

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.”

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence;

he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day,

or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place,

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.

Sermon

A newborn infant cries out in the night.

It's a plaintive, unsettled cry.

Her mother rushes to her crib, scoops her up,
and settles her gently against her waiting shoulder.

The baby utters a contented moan as Mom gently pats her back
while rocking back and forth on her feet.

Soon her baby's eyes begin to close.

Mom holds her a few moments longer
before setting her down in her crib,

and as she turns to leave she notices
her little one's eyes open ever so quickly,
peering through the crib bars.

But there is no cry

because Mom has once again answered her question –
a question she won't be able to put into words for several years,
but even now she is asking:

Is anyone there?

It is the deepest question she will ever ask...

THE MOST PROFOUND question of the human soul:

Am I alone?

Have I been thrust into this world only to be abandoned?

Is anyone there?

With this second "Great End of the Church"

God's people answer this question
with a resounding "No!" and a resounding "Yes!"

No, you are not alone!

Yes, there is someone here!

At birth and at death and through every life passage in between,
within this building...

as part of this people...
you will find shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship.

If the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind¹

is about spreading the seed of faith,

then this second "Great End" is all about
that seed being protected and watered and fed
so that it grows to maturity.

I noticed something this week.

I noticed that all of the other "Great Ends"
are expressed using a single word... a single action:

proclamation, preservation, maintenance, promotion, exhibition.

¹ The first Great End of the Church and the theme of last Sunday's sermon.

But for some reason today's "Great End"
employs three words describing three works:
shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship.
Let's ponder each of these in turn.

First, the *shelter of the children of God*.

If we take the word "shelter" literally to mean physical shelter,
then clearly we Presbyterians take this seriously.
If you are one to visit Presbyterian churches when traveling,
you know that regardless of how grand or modest,
we take seriously the buildings and the grounds
of our communal shelters.

However, you probably also know
there's almost always some tension between
how much the church spends on buildings
and how much we spend on mission and outreach and programs.

A pastor friend told me about a foreign missionary who retired,
came back to the states and joined his church.
Not long after, his church embarked on a capital campaign
to fund a much-needed renovation project.
Well, when it came time to make a pledge
this retired missionary made an appointment to tell my friend
that he didn't believe in funding buildings,
only people and programs.
Let it be said that my pastor friend could hardly contain himself
when several months after the project was finished,
this same fellow asked to use a room for a weekly meeting.

It's true that churches can get carried away with our buildings...
our priorities can get out all of whack,
But to ignore our sanctuaries
and classrooms
and gathering spaces
is to deny that there's a certain "place-ness" to this shelter
we are called to provide.

One thing more on this.
I've noticed, and I think have mentioned on numerous occasions,
just how often this sense of "place-ness"
is associated with a particular spot in the building...
and specifically, that most of you have found your own special places
to sit on Sunday mornings.
You don't need a GPS to guide you from the door to your spot...
AND woe be upon anyone who might sit there!

Please, if you arrive a little late to worship some Sunday
and someone is sitting in “your spot,”
please, I beg you, simply smile at them... greet them...
ask them their names... invite them to coffee.
Then, go find another spot
And just make sure you’re here early next week.
For many of us the “place-ness of this shelter
is a very emotional... it is a very spiritual thing...
because in this “shelter” we feel safe... protected... at home.

The second work of this Great End is
the *nurture of the children of God*.
If providing *shelter* is mainly about *this PLACE*,
then providing *nurture* is about *these PEOPLE*.
If *shelter* is about *safety and protection*,
then *nurture* is about our *nourishment and growth* in Christ.

To me, the primary task of Christian nurture
is the continual reminding of each other who it is we really are.
This place is where the things that really matter are reinforced...
it’s where the values we cherish are etched into our hearts
so we don’t forget them.²
It’s as one preacher’s Daddy used to say to him
every time he went out on a date,
“Son, remember who you are.”
We are nurtured by the church to remember who we really are.

One of our most cherished experiences as a community
is the baptism of one whom God has called.
Be it an infant brought by his or her parents...
an adolescent who after confirmation class
is called to profess her faith...
or whether it is an adult whom Christ has called later in life...
it is through baptism that we are adopted into Christ’s family...
baptism marks us as belonging to Christ.

Yet, that’s not where it ends.
As in each of our families, so it is with Christ’s family –
there is an ongoing need to learn what it means to belong.

This week I read about a couple who adopted
two little girls from China:
Amy at 20 months,

² Christine Chakoian in her sermon “Starting at the Ends” published in *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church*, Joseph D. Small, editor (Geneva Press-2010), p.33

and two years later, Suzy at 3 ½ years.
When Suzy was adopted,
Amy wasted no time showing her the ropes in her new family.
Though about Amy's age,
Suzy didn't join the family knowing
what it meant to be a Spencer, but she learned.
And she learned from her adopted sister.

That's how it is in the household of God;
we don't start with a full understanding.
There is language to be learned,
there are behaviors to be practiced,
there are the values and priorities to keep front and center...
and we learn in large part from one another,
from sisters and brothers in Christ
who welcome us in and show us the ropes.³

There was a baptism one morning in a church.
After the service the pastor was standing around talking to folks
when he felt a small hand tugging on his robe.
It was a little boy in the church
who looked him dead in the eyes and said,
“Where's this kid I'm supposed to raise.
If I'm going to raise him, I need to know what he looks like.”

Out of the mouth of this babe comes great wisdom
because what this kid knew is that nurture is always personal...
it's always relational...
and that to truly nurture one another
we need to know what one another looks like.
This provides me the opportunity to interrupt
this regularly scheduled program to shamelessly plug
this morning's Caring Connection gatherings.
In a church with almost 500 active members
and many more active participants,
Caring Connections are one of the ways
we come to know each other.
So, if you were planning to just head out after worship,
but can make the time, please reconsider.
Grab a cup of coffee and a cookie and find your Caring Connection.
Because if we're going to nurture one another
we need to know what we look like.

Finally, the *spiritual fellowship of the children of God*.
The words are important: spiritual... fellowship.

³ Ibid, p.33

Marjorie Thompson writes:

“There is a hunger abroad in our times, haunting lives and hearts.
Like an empty stomach aching beneath the sleek coat of a seemingly well-fed culture,
it reveals something is missing...”⁴

What is it that we are missing?

What is it that we most need?

What is it that we hunger for?

Though I suppose there are many different ways to say it,
certainly one thing we hunger for is spiritual fellowship.

We need relationships that are deep
and trusting and meaningful
because they are rooted in God’s Spirit.

This has been the assumption our Spiritual Exploration Team
has been working from these past two years -
this is the need this groups is trying to meet...
and this is the reason for this whole
“Ninety Day Prayer Adventure” you’ve been hearing about.

I beg your forgiveness,
but I feel another shameless advertisement coming on...
only it’s not the kind you’ll see next week during the Super Bowl.
Those will be plugging all kinds of products we don’t really need.
This one is plugging a practice that we ALL need –
regular, intentional prayer WITH and FOR one another.

For ninety days we want you to connect with God...
personally and individually.
For ninety days we want you
to connect with two other people *through* God.
We want you to take enough time... over enough days...
to create space for spiritual fellowship.

This Ninety Day Adventure begins afternoon
with a little kickoff event at 2 p.m.
We’ll hear how it works...
we’ll get matched up in groups of three...
and to really entice you, we’ll eat homemade pie together.

But... if you can’t come this afternoon and would like to join in,
simply use the little slip in the pew rack.
We’ll make sure you get connected with two others
and get all of the materials you will need.

Writer Ann Lamott tells the story

⁴ Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (WJK-1995), p.1

of a little seven-year-old girl who got lost one day:
The little girl ran up and down the streets
of the big town where they lived,
but she couldn't find a single landmark.
She was very scared, of course...
and finally, a policeman stopped to help her.
He put her in the passenger seat of his car,
and drove around the neighborhood
until she finally saw her church.
She pointed it out to the policeman,
and then told him firmly, "You can let me out now.
This is my church and I can always find my way home from here."

This, Lamott says, is how she feels about her church:
"... because no matter how bad I am feeling,
how lost or lonely or frightened,
when I see the faces of the people at my church,
when I hear their tawny voices,
I can always find my way home."⁵
May God allow THAT be said about this church.
May God allow THAT be said about us!

⁵ Ann Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (NY:Pantheon, 1999).