

Psalm 61
"Hid With Christ in God"
August 14, 2022
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Ordinary Time

As we continue our journey through the psalms that we began in the 2016 and have continued each summer since, the psalm that is before us this morning is Psalm 61.

Listen now to God's word from Psalm 61, which is printed on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read along.

Psalm 61

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. Of David.

*1 Hear my cry, O God,
listen to my prayer;*

*2 from the end of the earth I call to you
when my heart is faint.*

*Lead me to the rock
that is higher than I,*

*3 for you have been my refuge,
a strong tower against the enemy.*

*4 Let me dwell in your tent forever!
Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!*

*5 For you, O God, have heard my vows;
you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.*

*6 Prolong the life of the king;
may his years endure to all generations!*

*7 May he be enthroned forever before God;
appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!*

*8 So will I ever sing praises to your name,
as I perform my vows day after day.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you.

Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

When your heart is faint, where do you go for refuge and rest?

In the midst of your anxieties and fears and weariness, where you flee? Where do you turn?

The image of the Living God as a refuge, a place of safety and protection and rest is one of the most predominant images used for God in the psalms - indeed, I would argue that it is THE most dominant image for God that the psalms give us.

The image the Psalmist seems to be trying to give us is that if we are with God, or perhaps more properly, if God is with us, we are absolutely safe with him.

The psalmist gives us many different perspectives, many different images to help us imaginatively understand what it means that God is our refuge.

Sometimes he calls God “my tower” or “my fortress” or “my stronghold,” which are all various ways of imagining God as a place of complete safety and protection.

Psalm 48, for example, describes God as an impregnable city, a fortress with towers and ramparts and citadels where are all the people of God dwell together in safety.

Sometimes the psalmists calls God “my shield” or “my rock,” which develops the same idea.

Psalm 18 piles a number of these images in the same verse: *“The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”*

Sometimes the psalmist, as in our psalm this morning, describes himself as being hidden under the shadow of God’s wings, which is a particularly powerful and intimate image.

Psalm 57 is typical of this image, as the psalmist says to God, *“In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by.”*

This image, which is repeated many times in the psalms, is rooted in the ark of the covenant which is at the heart of Israel’s tabernacle, and the winged cherubim - the powerful angelic creatures which guard and protect that holy place - a holy place of God’s presence where the psalmist understands himself to find absolute refuge and safety as he is hidden in the shadow of God’s wings.

Beloved, I just want to invite you to ponder this image of God for a moment. It’s so crucial for the psalm that we’re about to walk through.

What would it mean for you to really see and understand and believe God to be a refuge for you? A tower. A fortress. A place of complete safety and protection.

What would it mean for you imagine the Living God offering himself to you, in the midst of the chaos of your life, as a stronghold?

What would it mean for you to see God himself as the one who offers you sanctuary and rest under the shadow of his wings?

And not just once in a while, not just little moments of safety and peace, but what would it mean for you to see God as the one who makes himself your refuge always — such that he is always your safe place, always your place of strength and stability and protection all the days of your life?

I would love for you to ponder that, and consider that, beloved.

I hope that you taste the refuge of God here on Sunday mornings as we sing and pray and listen to the word and commune with Christ at his table and receive his blessing.

And I hope that sense of refuge and safety is something that you participate in during the rest of your life during the week as well.

Because this psalm argues that this kind of refuge and peace is what God truly offers to you and me as well.

Not just occasionally, not just once in a while, but always, because this safety, this refuge, this peace, is secured for us in Jesus, the Son of God, who dwells with his Father forever.

Let me show you what I mean.

Our psalm today is a short one, and it breaks up pretty easily into two sections - verses 1-5 is the first section, the first movement of the argument, and verses 6-8 form the second, closing portion.

In verses 1-3, the psalmist begins:

*1 Hear my cry, O God,
listen to my prayer;
2 from the end of the earth I call to you
when my heart is faint.
Lead me to the rock
that is higher than I,
3 for you have been my refuge,
a strong tower against the enemy.*

These verses are full of longing.

The psalmist begins in a place of isolation and weakness.

His heart is faint. He feels as though he is at the end of the earth.

He can't find peace or rest on his own - he can't manufacture it for himself, no matter how hard he tries. Meditation, exercise, thinking calm thoughts - none of those things are going to help him.

And notice what the psalmist does here. He doesn't give in to despair. He cries out for help.

Ironically, there's a kind of pride that is found in embracing despair. When we give into despair, essentially what we're saying is that I'm the only one who can fix my life, and I can't fix it, well, then, it's hopeless.

But the psalmist, instead of giving in to the pride of despair, embraces the humility of dependence.

He knows he needs something outside of himself to deliver him from his weariness and his fear.

Lead me to the rock that is higher than I, he says to God.

For you, O God have been my refuge, my strong tower against my enemy.

The psalmist is recalling previous experiences of the refuge and rest that God provides. He recalls that God has been a strong tower for him.

But the psalmist doesn't want that peace, that refuge, just for fragmentary moments. He wants it forever.

And in verses 4-5, his longing spills over. The psalmist wants all of it, he wants a peace that lasts.

4 Let me dwell in your tent forever!

Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!

5 For you, O God, have heard my vows;

you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.

The psalmist wants to know God's presence always, without interruption.

He wants to find refuge under the shelter of God's wings.

You see, the psalmist wants this kind of communion with God - a communion that is eternal, that is not broken or interrupted.

And I would argue that all of our longing for peace and refuge and safety is rooted in this fundamental desire - to be in unbroken communion with God forever.

But how can this be achieved? How can we gain access to God in this way, such that all of our lives are lived before his face?

The second section of our psalm, verses 6-8, answer this question. But they do so in an interesting, and I think, surprising way.

After five verses where he is talking about his own personal desire to find his refuge always in God, the Psalmist, who is David himself, suddenly begins to talk about the king, and how he wants *the king* to always live in God's presence.

6 Prolong the life of the king;

may his years endure to all generations!

7 May he be enthroned forever before God;

appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!

8 So will I ever sing praises to your name,

as I perform my vows day after day.

Now, what is David talking about here? Why does he suddenly begin speaking to God about a king that he wants to live always in God's presence?

David isn't talking about himself in the third person here. He knows that he's going to die, he knows that he's not going to live forever.

And more than that, David knows that his access to the refuge that God provides is always going to be limited if it depends on him.

It's limited by his weakness, by the faintness of his heart, by the ways that he wanders from God's presence.

What David needs, and what we need, is an eternal representative that will live always before the face of God on our behalf, someone to whom we can be forever united, and thus always dwell securely with the king before the face of God.

In this way, and in this way only, will we be able to dwell in God's tent forever - in this way, and in this way only will we be empowered to take refuge always under the shelter of God's wings.

And, of course, that is just what God has provided for us in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of his Son Jesus Christ.

For Jesus Christ of course, is the one David is speaking of, when he says: *6 Prolong the life of the king;*

may his years endure to all generations!

7 May he be enthroned forever before God;

appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!

I mean think how perfectly those words describe our Lord and his present life, right now, before the face of the Father.

I don't know if you do this often, but I encourage you, beloved, to meditate frequently on the present life of Jesus in heaven.

In your life, I know, you have many anxieties. I know. I do too.

In your life, I know, you have sadness and doubts and fears and you wonder if God is with you, and whether he is actually bringing all things to a good end.

But, beloved, Jesus is not afraid in heaven today. He is not sad. He is not anxious.

Yes, there was a time, during his earthly life, that Jesus suffered. And was sad. And during those years, he experienced all the suffering and temptation we know, though without sin.

But, now - today - in the presence of his Father, after his resurrection, after his victory over sin and death and Satan?

Beloved, today, right now, Jesus is perfectly joyful. Perfectly at peace. He is sheltered under the wings of his Father, and he knows fully the refuge and solace of the Love of God.

In Colossians 3, Paul writes to his readers and he says these remarkable words, words that will fundamentally change your life and your relationship to God if you really let them sink into your bones and become real in your heart.

Paul says to his readers, and to us: *"You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."*

In other words, Paul is saying - your life actually bears a great secret. It's not necessarily apparent to everyone you meet and talk to throughout the day. Sometimes you actually forget it yourself. But what is most true about you, beloved, is that you, right now, are actually hidden with Christ in the bosom of God.

Jesus dwells eternally in the heart of the Father, and your life is hidden with him. And the kind of refuge and peace and solace and comfort that Jesus experiences right now is actually made available to you by faith, and by the work of the Spirit.

And what I want you to see is that Paul didn't somehow just invent this doctrine of our union with Christ meaning that we actually dwell with Jesus who is himself now, as a living man, hidden in the bosom of his Father.

No, Paul is relying on the logic of the Scriptures of the whole - he is actually going back into the Old Testament and relying on how the High Priest bore the names of the Tribes of Israel on his garments when he went into the holy place in the Tabernacle, he's relying on the psalms of David, and how David who was the king longed for an eternal king who would endure for all generations, who would be enthroned before God forever, who would, in himself, guarantee David's capacity to dwell in God's tent always and continually find his refuge in the Living God.

Indeed, all of redemptive history points to this - a High Priest, an Eternal King, whose years would endure to all generations, who would be enthroned before God forever, over whom God would always be pouring out his steadfast love and faithfulness.

And it is this Living Christ who is, as Paul puts it in Hebrews 6, a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain.

And what I want you to see beloved, is that the peace and refuge and solace and confidence that the Psalmist longs for here in Psalm 61 is available to you always.

And this peace and refuge isn't something you can bring into existence. It's not something you can manufacture for yourself through your discipline or your good intentions or your willpower.

No, this kind of peace and refuge and safety is something you fall into, not something you achieve.

This kind of refuge is given to you as a gift, it's something that you learn to inhabit because it comes to you from outside yourself.

Because the refuge I'm talking about is located forever in the eternal peace and refuge and solace and confidence enjoyed even now by Jesus, the one in whom your life is hid.

For you have died, beloved, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.