

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16 *Snare Scare*

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What would you title your autobiography?

Biography is not a genre I enjoy. Generally I don't read autobiographies and I'm not famous enough to ever write one. But, it's still fun to think of titles for mine. While the title of my autobiography changes based on what's happening in life, right now I think I would call it "Hiding in my Car Eating."

As a minister in a rural area, I spend a lot of time in my car. In the past eight years, my car has racked up over two hundred thirty-seven thousand miles. Indeed, sometime during October when I am on sabbatical I anticipate reaching the moon milestone—two hundred thirty-eight thousand nine hundred miles—I will have traveled in that car the distance from the earth to the moon. I have two boxes of Moon Pies in the back seat ready and waiting for the moment when I pull over to celebrate the momentous occasion. I'm just hoping that it doesn't happen when Jesse and I are on the Mackinac Bridge on our way to the UP in a couple of weeks because there is no way I am spending one extra moment than absolutely necessary on that bridge . . . the Moon Pies will just have to wait.

With all of the driving I do between our home out north of Maple City to Nathan's school in Leland to the church here in Suttons Bay to hospital visits and Bible studies in Traverse City . . . I'm on the road a lot which is fine because I really like going places in my car. When it's hot, I can turn on the air conditioner. When it's cold, I can turn on the heat. When it's raining, it keeps me dry. When it's sunny, it shields me from harmful UV rays. When I'm sad I can cry my eyes out in there and no one can see me. When I'm happy I can sing at the top of my lungs and no one can hear me. And, when I'm hungry, I can just pull over and hide in my car eating. It seems like I spend an inordinate amount of time hiding in my car eating—catching a quick lunch on my way to a meeting, having a snack after a sad pastoral visit (I'm what they call an emotional eater), killing time between appointments. My car is my shelter, it is my refuge.

Refuge is a word apropos to this morning's reading from Psalms. Old Testament scholar Jerome Creach has argued that the word [refuge] "is a filter through which the Psalter in its entirety can be viewed theologically."¹ In Creach's view, if you want one handle by which to grasp the Psalter's witness regarding the human-divine relationship, the concept of 'refuge' is about the best place to start.²

Thinking about the places we find refuge in our daily lives—whether in our cars, our homes, at our work, in the pages of a good book, or in the arms of someone we love—thinking of these places of refuge helps us to begin to connect, though in a somewhat pedestrian way, to what the author tries to communicate about a much grander and grounded relationship with God in today's scripture reading. Again, Old Testament scholar Creach, "What this term [refuge] signifies is that the relationship between God and humanity is one of *dependence*. Believers are those who seek shelter, refuge, and protection in God . . ."³

We find numerous references throughout the book of Psalms to God as a refuge. While I often think of a refuge as a place, Google dictionary defines refuge as *a condition of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger, or trouble*. That is the kind of refuge for which the Psalmist yearns, to live in a condition of being safe and sheltered. And, it is a condition in which most of us wish to be living as well . . . we seek refuge from our fear, our worries, our doubts, refuge from our shame, our weakness, our sin, refuge from our confusion, our anger, our grief . . . we are people seeking refuge from myriad pursuits, dangers, and troubles.

¹ *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (JSOTSupp 217; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 51 n 6.

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=430

³ *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (JSOTSupp 217; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 51 n 6.

Every day, in small and big ways, we face temptations and dangers, we encounter what we might call “snare scares.” A snare is a trap, often used for catching birds. That’s the metaphor the Psalmist uses in this passage “surely God will save you from the fowler’s snare.” God rescues us from that which would otherwise trap us and hold us prisoner—God is there when the snares scare us, God is there when no one else is, God is there when there is no place else to go.

God is our refuge, God is our condition. A condition is *the circumstances affecting the way in which people live or work, especially with regard to their safety or well-being*. With God as our refuge, *the circumstances affecting the way in which we live or work* are altered. As people who join our voices with that of the Psalmist declaring “God is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust” we know in whom, and through whom, we have our being. With God as refuge, our condition, the circumstances of our lives change.

Indeed, the children of God are not victims of circumstance, left helpless and hopeless by the troubles in the world that are vastly beyond our direct control. Rather, the circumstances of our lives are such that we lean into the possibilities and promises that come from trusting that God is ultimately in control. As a professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul describes it, “This is, after all, what much of the life of faith comes down to—putting one’s life in God’s hands and struggling to trust in and rely on God.”⁴

And sometimes keeping the faith is a mighty struggle. Turn on the news, open the paper, log in to social media, listen to your kid’s accounting of what one student did to another at school that day . . . it can be a struggle to trust in and rely on God. And that, my friends, is why I believe we need times like this together.

When I begin losing faith and am tempted to look for refuge outside of God—it is this community of believers who pull me back in. You tell me your stories of faith and when you do, my own is strengthened. You express the ways in which God has been your refuge during a hard time and when you do, you remind me that I can do the same. You bring your children here to be baptized and when you do, you remind me, and all of us, that this all matters, indeed it is the thing that matters most—these circumstances in which we find ourselves as children of God, disciples of Christ, and brothers and sisters on the journey.

And so it is that we, the priesthood of all believers, create a kind of refuge—a place with no snare scares—a safe space free from pursuits, dangers, and struggles. A place where the conditions and circumstances are such that we gather to be reminded and celebrate that God is our refuge and our strength, an ever present help in trouble.

That being said, I’d like to take a moment to say good bye for now. Even though this place is even more a refuge to me than is my car, I need a break and I am so very grateful for the gift of sabbatical you offer. But, having a few years of this sabbatical thing under my belt now, after I’ve had time to rest, and run, and write—I’m going to need to get back here. I’m going to need to be back in this refuge, back in the circumstances of life among my church family, where I get to be reminded, day in and day out, of whose I really am and in whom I shall put my trust. In the meantime, I’ll go to worship in some other places, and I’m sure I’ll find myself in similar circumstances, that those folks will remind me of the same thing—remind me of this ultimate truth of what it is to find refuge in God, the last bit of Psalm 91 as expressed in Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* . . . ¹⁴⁻¹⁶ “If you’ll hold on to me for dear life,” says GOD, “I’ll get you out of any trouble. I’ll give you the best of care if you’ll only get to know and trust me. Call me and I’ll answer, be at your side in bad times; I’ll rescue you, then throw you a party. I’ll give you a long life, give you a long drink of salvation!”

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=430