

“Don’t Give Up!”—Biblical Offerings of Hope... *for Protection*

Five of six Lenten sermons by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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Psalm 91:14-16 NRSV

- ¹⁴ Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
¹⁵ When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.
¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

Mark 4:35-41 NRSV

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

In the church season of Lent leading up to Easter, this year I’m offering this series called “Don’t Give Up! – Biblical Offerings of Hope.” This week’s installment is called “Hope for Protection.”

While flipping through channels last week I happened upon a 1989 movie called “Road House.” I’d never seen it though I’d heard of it, largely because of its star Patrick Swayze, and also because of its reputation for a screenplay that was mediocre at best.

Patrick Swayze plays a mysterious out-of-towner who gets hired as a bouncer at a small-town bar. Ben Gazarra is the town’s richest resident. He’s “a big fish in a small pond,” a self-centered megalomaniac who intimidates everyone into bowing to his desires. His intimidation takes many forms:

- threats;
- physical violence carried out by lackeys with much brawn and little brain, and;
- shaking down the town’s shopkeepers and business owners for monthly under-the-table payments so an unfortunate “accident” doesn’t befall them.

In gangster movies those kinds of payments are called “protection money.” Fortunately, I would presume that most of us have never had to concern ourselves with *that* kind of “protection.”

When we think of being protected, the first thing that may come to mind could be those fictional figures constantly appearing in insurance company TV ads:

- characters like “Flo” and “Jamie” and “Dr. Rick;”
- or a talking gecko or a squawking emu;
- or a khaki-attired Jake;
- or the curator of a museum of oddball insurance claims;
- or a disheveled, accident-prone personification of “Mayhem.”

Those characters are intended to help us warm up to the concept of purchasing insurance as protection from disaster.

The Bible describes protection as well. But the Bible presents a different kind of protection. Here’s the message I hope you’ll take away today: in a nutshell, our relation to God is our protection. You see, our reality is this: God knows us. God knows you.

- God knows you who have tried to keep God near the center of your life.
- And God knows you even if you have, well, turned your back and pretty much ignored God except for those moments of desperation when you cried out in hopes of help from on high.

Yes, God knows us, and we know God. We entrust our lives to the One who gave us life. The Israelite prophet Isaiah offered these words expressing to us God’s acceptance and offering God’s assurance of salvation, of protection:

¹ Israel, the LORD who created you says,

“Do not be afraid – I will save you.

I have called you by name – you are mine.

² When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you;
your troubles will not overwhelm you.

When you pass through fire, you will not be burned;
the hard trials that come will not hurt you.

³ For I am the LORD your God,
the holy God of Israel, who saves you.¹

Did you hear that?

I will save you... I have called you... I will be with you....

We live in relationship with God. And because our lives are in relationship with God – because our lives are intertwined with God and dependent on God and entrusted to God – because our lives are inseparable from the spirit of God, God’s protection encompasses and enfolds us as though wings spread over us to shelter us from the storm of life.

An article in National Geographic from several years ago offered a surprising and powerful illustration of that kind of protection:

After a forest fire in Yellowstone National Park..., forest rangers began their trek up a mountain to assess the inferno’s damage. One ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes, perched statuesquely on the ground at the base of a tree. Somewhat sickened by the eerie sight, he knocked over the bird with a stick. When he struck it, three tiny chicks scurried from under their dead mother’s wings. The loving mother, keenly aware of impending disaster, had carried her offspring to the base of the tree and had gathered them under her wings, instinctively knowing that the toxic smoke would

¹ Isaiah 43:1-3 Good News Translation

rise. She could have flown to safety but had refused to abandon her babies. When the blaze had arrived and the heat had singed her small body, the mother had remained steadfast. Because she had been willing to die, those under the cover of her wings would live.²

That's the word for today: we trust that our lives are under the shelter of God's protection as mother hen's wings shelter her young. Quite simply, we have protection with God because we are with God. It's not a *quid pro quo* – we haven't done something that causes us to deserve God's protection. Our relationship with God – being children of God – graces us with the gift of confidence that we live in the shadow of the Almighty and Everlasting God.

That was the message Jesus spoke to his disciples in today's familiar story from the gospel of Mark. As Jesus and his disciples sailed toward the opposite shore of the Sea of Galilee a violent storm suddenly descended upon them.

The disciples struggled and tugged against the fury of the storm. They couldn't believe that Jesus was not only not worried, but he was actually napping!

Someone reached down and shook him as another shouted above the gale-force winds, "Jesus, don't you care that we're about to die!?" He stood in the violently-pitching boat. "Be quiet!" he said to the wind, and to the waters he commanded, "Be still." And they did. The speechless disciples must have looked at him with amazement.

"Jesus, speaking to the storm outside, also addresses the storms within when he says, 'Peace! Be Still!' Over the heads of his first disciples he says to us as well, 'Why are you afraid? Can you not yet trust the God you see in me?'"³

Jesus invites us to trust God who we see and know and embrace through him. But his is not the Bible's only assurance that our lives abide in the protection of our Creator God. For instance:

- Proverbs 18:10 paints this picture of God's protection: "The Lord is like a strong tower, where the righteous can go and be safe."⁴
- Psalm 46 declares God's protection: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."⁵
- Psalm 121 predicts God's rescue: "I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth."⁶

As we acknowledge and serve our Creator God by striving to follow the example and obedience of Jesus we discover this calming assurance: that protection in life and in death is ours because God has called us – called us into relationship with the One we call our Heavenly Father. Amen.

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² From a sermon by Dean Courtier, "A conditional promise?" 11/17/2009 at <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/74355/mother-hen-sacrifices-her-life-to-protect-chicks-by-sermon-central> accessed 3/11/2021

³ Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Mark*. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1983, 103

⁴ Proverbs 18:10 Good News Translation

⁵ Psalm 46:1 New Revised Standard Version

⁶ Psalm 121:1-2 New Revised Standard Version