

01.18.26 ~ 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany

“Preparation for Decision”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words of Assurance

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 ^{NIV}

Pew Bible 516, 517

- ¹ Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
- ² I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.”
- ⁹ If you say, “The Lord is my refuge,”
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
- ¹⁰ no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
- ¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
- ¹² they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
- ¹³ You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.
- ¹⁴ “Because he loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
- ¹⁵ He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
- ¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.”

Leader: These Are Words of Assurance.

People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Decision

Matthew 4:1-11 ^{NIV}

Pew Bible 837

- ¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”
- ⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:
- “He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”
- ⁷ Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Leader: These Are Words of Temptation.

People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Courageous Lord, we kneel before you in awesome wonder that you who have no sin could resist the powerful worldly temptations of evil. We come to hear more of your divine motivation and preparation for ministry. As we build and review the foundations of our faith, let us have open minds and hearts to be transformed as you were there in the desert. May our spiritual roots be defined, nourished, and strengthened by your word and the Gospel writer’s account, so that we can recall you are with us in our own “deserts” of temptation and challenges. Let us roll into this new year with reflection, prayer, and preparation. Please speak through this message and messenger as we bring our theme into understanding! In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Can you believe it has been 7 years since my trial sermon here at United Baptist? My official anniversary is February 1st, but since seven (7) is a holy number, I’d thought I’d bring it to our attention. If you recall, it was planned for January 13, 2019, one week after Rev. Dr. Wayne Yawn retired officially, and we had to cancel church due to snow! So, I got another week to prepare myself and my sermon. I am so grateful that you welcomed me into the pulpit and leadership of this church. It is fitting that we are discussing preparation and I am glad the snow caused no delays . . . yet.

During these challenging times in our world, it is fitting to remember that God is still on the throne and is with us in all circumstances. Our first passage tells how our security in God determines our ability to weather any storm or evil attack. I am not just speaking of snow or thunderstorms, but the storms of life and/or temptation. The

psalms are full of comforting and strengthening poetry to aid us as we seek God’s refuge, shelter, and strength. God’s titles in Psalm 91, such as “Most High” and “Almighty” in verse 1, are not words we use in everyday language, but they are perfect to stress the importance of his power as Ruler of the world, not just our daily comforter and guide. And “refuge” and “fortress” are metaphors that significantly model a protective shelter like a giant bird’s wing or a desert cave. In Psalm 23, “the Lord is my shepherd” indicates protection, so in this psalm I thought of a sheepfold as a refuge; if you recall, a sheepfold is a pen to hold the sheep overnight often with stone walls to protect a flock from predators.

In both Psalm 91 and Matthew 4, the protectors are God’s angels, and because of them, no harm would come to any who made the Lord their refuge and security. The angels not only protected believers but they also looked after them by caring for their needs and sharing their divine strength. In return for the psalmist’s or any believer’s love, the Lord promises to rescue him from danger, protect him from harm, and to satisfy his needs. The real or imagined dangers are no match for one who rests in the figurative arms of God:

- ¹⁴ “Because he loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
¹⁵ He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation (Psalm 91:14-16 ^{NIV}).”

The writer states without any doubt that God or his angels will deliver him. This language reminds me of our recent Isaiah Messianic passages and is almost a prophecy of Jesus as Messiah, isn’t it?

In the desert lands of the Middle East, there were caves for protection out of the harsh sun. And we know that important things often occurred in the desert – either training or revelation. Why did people go or still go to the desert over the centuries? Moses and the Israelites’ Forty Years in the desert (Exodus and Deuteronomy), Jesus (in our Matthew passage), and 3rd-5th century Christian hermits and monks like St. Anthony the Great and Paul of Thebes, collectively called the “desert fathers,” spent their spiritual lives in humility in Egyptian deserts while writing about their faith experiences there. Even great American artists like Georgia O’Keefe found solace and inspiration in the deserts of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The stark, unadorned nature of the desert eliminated distractions from daily life and provided a setting for intense reflection and communion with God. Temperatures exceeded 113 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer days and below freezing during winter nights. The chief livelihood was shepherding; it was often called the “wilderness” because it was hardly inhabited. Yes, in Israel’s Judean desert, I saw antelope, donkeys, camels, and rock hyraxes, but not much else! Online research says there are also sand cats, caracals which are desert lynxes, vultures, snakes, lizards and more. Rocks and clay were the terrain with an occasional oasis where water, food, and rest were plentiful. Survival in the desert was never guaranteed. One could hear better in the desert since there were no noise distractions of buildings, transportation, or general civilization. Their markets were small and usually mobile. Even today, the deserts are tourist attractions for four-wheelers but there are areas considered holy ground with crosses planted or monasteries built into the rocks.

Many pilgrims who go into the desert do so as Jesus did, to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. This was a test of sorts, so he fasted and prayed to his father in heaven for forty (40) days and nights. While he was in a famished and weakened physical state is when the devil came to him presenting alternative powers; we too encounter crises often when we are already near a breaking point, so use this passage to strengthen yourself in challenging situations. You heard the passage and can review it more carefully this week to pick up any nuances that apply to your own life. Jesus was challenged that he might not be the Son of God. The devil tried to trick him by saying if he were, God's angels would heal him after he jumped off a high precipice. And he was presented with riches and powers that any human might desire. But the verse that stood out to me was Jesus saying, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." This has a double meaning I believe: 1. don't put the angels of God or God himself to any test of good vs. evil because you will lose the battle; and 2. don't put me, Jesus, to the test because I am the Son of God and because of that divinity, the power is already mine and I will defeat you! How can you see that applying to your own struggles between temptation and obedience?

Two other important insights from the last section are his anger and fighting spirit, "Away from me Satan!" Sometimes, the only way to battle evil is with God's righteous anger and strength. Discernment is key, not reaction, however. The second insight is that after any extreme battle with temptation or evil, one must rest and allow the angels to tend your soul, mind, emotions, and physical body. I am finally learning as I age that stress takes a huge toll on the physical as well as mental condition. Even

Jesus, after a long time of communion with his Father still needed time to retreat, recover, and receive the healing of God's love, peace, mercy, and sustenance. How might that apply to your own life, especially if you are in the battles of evil, temptation, or illness? There are really about three or four sermons in these two passages, but time is short, so please go back and re-read both passages with new eyes. Let me know if and how they nourish the roots of your faith.

I had planned to preach about how this desert experience prepared Jesus for his ministry, and yes, it did, but the Holy Spirit changed my direction. May we be more like Jesus in the discipline of fasting and spending time with God and more willing to battle the evils we encounter with God's love and fury, knowing that his angels will address our needs. That deeper assurance of his purpose and divine power is what prepared Christ to begin his public ministry. You too are beloved. Never forget that Christ and our salvation gives us the power to defy evil and temptation. Amen! ||

Please pray with me now: Dear Lord, we thank you for your son, Jesus, and his example. Help us to digest these words and remember them when we face our own storms, corrupt evil, or temptations. Make us spiritually rich this season as we explore the roots and branches of our faith. Please fill this sanctuary with those seeking your presence and open opportunities for invitation. May our preparations for decision be consistent and rooted in you. Bless us as we go on our way in the holy name of Jesus, Amen.