

Psalm 91

1 John 1: 1-4

March 20, 2011

Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

The Great Ends of the Church

The Shelter, Nurture and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God

Last week we encountered the first of the Great Ends of the Church: the Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind. This first Great End heads the list for a reason. It is the highest purpose of the community of faith. It is our supreme calling to announce to the world the Good News that in and through Jesus Christ God has restored humanity to the relationship we had with God before Adam and Eve ruptured that relationship.

This good news is *good* because we are suffering; the world is suffering because we are alienated from God, from each other and from the creation. It is *good* to know that we are not condemned to be alienated from God, each other and creation.

Moreover, this good news is *news* because in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ *this restoration of relationship has taken place!* The war is over from God's side. God has declared peace. Our task is to believe this good news and lay down our arms and surrender to the love and grace of God given to us in and through his son, Jesus. The gift has been *given*. It is our job to *receive* the gift and live lives which say "thank you!"

Now there may be a few skeptics here who are joined by a world of skeptics who are not here who hear this message and shake their heads at the sad state of naïveté revealed by such a proclamation. Does the minister not read the newspaper or watch the news? Is he insulated from the pain and suffering of his own parishioners? Is he unaware that some of the

greatest violators of humanity and creation have been and continue to be people who proclaim this so-called *good news*?

Yet at the risk of appearing credulous and soft headed I repeat without hesitation or apology: in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead *God has restored relationship with humanity*. As we sing on Easter Sunday,

The strife is o'er, the battle done;
The victory of life is won. Alleluia!

So, if the news is so good why is the world so bad? Why is there so much violence, greed and catastrophe?

Just because God has made peace with us does not mean that we have made peace with God. It is one thing for restoration to be announced. It is another for it to take place. And that is where we come in. The process of the reconciliation of the world begins with us who have believed the good news and have begun the journey of *allowing* that good news to transform our lives. God in Christ has restored us. We must model the living of the reconciled life.

That is why shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship must begin with believers—the ones referred to in this Great End as the Children of God. You may object, “But isn’t everyone a child of God? Isn’t everyone created in the image and likeness of God?” Absolutely. Everybody is a child of God. The issue is this: not everybody claims their identity as God’s children. Many deny that there is a God to be a child of.

I have said on many occasions that MJ and I love our children with a heartbreakingly deep love. They can do nothing to change that fact. They are always our children. However if they never acknowledge that love or even act as if they have no parents they get no benefit of

that love. We would daily hope for them to turn and receive the love we yearn to give; but we cannot *make them* receive our love or love us in return. It is that way with God. So in this sense, “children of God” refers to those of us who claim God as our heavenly Parent and seek to receive and return that love through worship and service.

That is why the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of us who are believing children of God is so important. For how are we to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humankind if we do not actively experience the living relationship that comes from being reconciled to God?

With this understanding let us ask what it means to provide shelter. In its usual sense a shelter is a structure designed to protect from danger and exposure to the elements of nature. We think of homeless shelters, shelters for abused women, shelters for those devastated by catastrophic natural events. When I was a child there were bomb shelters to protect us from possible atomic explosions. All of these are structures which are intended to help people feel safe from danger.

But as Psalm 91 expresses, there is another kind of shelter. We may live in a secure house and not be exposed to any kind of external material threat. Yet most of us experience at one time or another, some of us for extended periods of time, an acute sense of disturbance. Just as the tectonic plates shifted on the floor of the Pacific Ocean brought havoc to the people of Japan, so the very things we rely on to provide security can disappear in a matter of minutes and seconds. We lose a job, someone dear to us dies, a profound relationship breaks apart, we are betrayed by someone we trust, or assaulted or robbed and our world falls apart. We are still walking around looking fine to the world but our inner landscape is devastated. Where do we go where we can recover trust and begin to live again?

The writer of Psalm 91 tells us:

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.

It will come as no surprise to most you that the Hebrew word translated "shelter" here does not refer to a physical shelter. Indeed the word means a hidden and secret place. Thus when the writer addresses the ones who "dwell in the shelter of the Most High" this a profoundly *spiritual* image.

In light of this, what might it mean to dwell in the shelter of God?

Let me begin by stating what it does *not* mean. Seeking to dwell in the shelter of the Most High does not mean to withdraw from the world. It does not mean to withdraw from our feelings. It does not mean to hide from our troubles. This of course is our natural response when we are hurt, betrayed, disappointed or bereft. We withdraw so we do not feel the pain. We withdraw into ourselves. This is not necessarily bad as a first reaction. If I burn my hand on a hot pan I will probably pull back so that the burn does not become worse. However, if as a result of this experience I never cook again, it might be suggested that I have overreacted in a not to healthy way.

In the same way when someone hurts us we may well pull back to work through our feelings and seek to gain perspective. However if we permanently withdraw from the relationship we cut ourselves off from what had been a source of friendship and support. We witness that the power of hurt is greater than the power of love.

By contrast, seeking to dwell in the shelter of the Most High is to seek to abide in the ultimate safe space. To dwell in the hidden and secret hiding place in the heart of God is to

discover that despite the very real anguish of life that comes from living in a world of broken relationships—we are *safe*. When we cultivate the experience of dwelling in the shelter of the heart of God we are not abandoned and our lives are secure.