

Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost (C/RCL)

Psalm 17

Holy Trinity, Manasquan

November 11, 2007

Again we're blessed with one of those most-beautiful-of-all Scripture verses that can be a fleece blanket in the cold, a flashlight in the dark, homemade chicken soup when we're sick, courage when we're scared, encouragement when we're discouraged, faith when we're filled with doubt:

Keep me as the apple of your eye;
hide me under the shadow of your wings....

Psalm 17, verse 8

On this Veteran's Day weekend, let me draw a word-picture of hiding under the shadow of someone's wing. Our kitten, Sophie Harriet, was due for her rabies shot on Friday morning. Mark was scheduled to take her. He's duty chaplain up at Fort Monmouth this week, and was also scheduled to say the invocation, the opening prayer for an official luncheon, at noon. He didn't have enough time to change in between his two appointments, so he wore his Army uniform, his Class A's, to the vets. Picture this big man, dressed as a soldier, carrying a little cat carrier into the animal hospital. He noticed that Sophie Harriet was so frightened she was trembling, so he took her out of the carrier and held her in his arms. She peeked fearfully out at all the other critters and people in the busy waiting room, then proceeded to bury her head under his arm.

...[H]ide me under the shadow of your wings....

Sometimes that's what **we** want to be able to do, isn't it? To be cradled protectively in God's arms, where no danger can touch us. When we're threatened by people or circumstances around us or storms within us, we look to God for safety.

"Keep me as the apple of your eye" basically says the same thing. The apple of the eye is the pupil. **We** know that's the opening through which light passes into the eye and is then projected onto the retina. In the old days, though, people thought the pupil was solid and served as the actual organ of

sight. What sense is more precious than sight?? “Keep me as the apple of your eye” means “Protect me, Lord, as your greatest treasure, your prize possession.”

Soldiers protect us and our nation physically. God protects us physically **and** spiritually. Angels are often portrayed as the army of God, since St. Michael the Archangel is described leading the battle against Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness who martialled the other fallen angels in war against God. The word angel simply means “messenger,” though. There are many who don’t literally **have** wings who help us shelter under the shadow of **God’s** wing when we’re in need of holy healing and spiritual safety.

At this weekend’s 8:45 service we’re commissioning ten new Stephen Ministers to join those who already help to “bear the burdens” of members of our faith family and community. (The “newbies” include some of our Saturday night “regulars”: Carla Conaty, Linda Meyers and Jeanne Schwarz.) Stephen Ministers receive fifty hours of training in how to be a confidential, compassionate presence, an understanding listener and a spiritual friend to those facing a crisis. Usually a Stephen Minister meets weekly for an hour or so with her care receiver. The challenge that person is facing may be unemployment, a move to a nursing home, diagnosis with a serious illness, post-partum depression, the death of a loved one, divorce, or **any** life change that is troubling.

Stephen Ministers aren’t professional counselors; they are trained volunteers who extend this community’s care into the life of its members. Stephen Ministers can’t address all needs; part of their training is recognizing problems which require the attention of a professional. Stephen Ministers don’t work as lone rangers; they are in regular supervision to provide the best possible care to their care receivers. An important truth we continually remind ourselves and each other of is this: **“We are the caregivers; God is the Curegiver.”** Any healing, hope, peace, comfort that comes from a Stephen Ministry relationship is rooted in God’s love and power.

This weekend’s passage from Second Thessalonians ends like this:

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

(2 Thessalonians 2.16-17)

God can comfort and strengthen us however God wants, but **God often uses people** as human channels of heavenly healing grace and divine protective power. Soldiers, police, firefighters have a vocation, a calling from God to protect and help God's people. Stephen Ministers have a calling to embody Christ's love and resurrection hope in one-on-one caring relationships. Every Christian has a baptismal calling to "comfort... hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word," as life gives us the opportunity.

Bible experts think that the image in Psalm 17 of hiding under the shadow of God's wings may have come from the carved sculpture of angels, seraphim, who sat on either end of the Ark of the Covenant, a chest which held the tablets Moses received on Mt. Sinai and some of the manna from the desert journey, and which looked like a throne for the invisible God. That "treasure chest" was kept in the Holy of Holies, the room in the heart of the Temple, which only the high priest could enter, and only once a year....

The other place the psalmist could have come up with the image of hiding under the shadow of God's wings is, of course, the world of nature in which baby birds scurry under their mother's wings for safety from enemies, shelter from storms, and just plain warmth, comfort and togetherness. The wonderful thing about being a child of God is that no matter how old we are we can **still** find shelter under God's wings, which are big enough to cover children and adults alike. Another marvelous gift is that when we are strong and confident again, we become the one with wings under which others can shelter: both kittens and people. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

