

Song of Plagues

How Psalm 91 Helps Us Pray during Pandemic

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When the college campus where I teach closed over a month ago, an older colleague said it reminded him of the time just after the draft announcement during the Vietnam War. Crying students filled the hallways, and dazed professors huddled in groups outside their offices. Since then, as the COVID-19 crisis has intensified, others have reached for similar analogies: Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell called Congress's \$2 trillion relief package "a wartime level of investment in our nation." Doctors and nurses have likened their hospitals to "war zones." And of course everyone now curses our "invisible enemy," the coronavirus itself.

This collective recourse to war as an analogue for pandemic makes sense: none of us has ever lived through one before. We don't know how to ground it in previous experience. Maybe we know someone who fought in World War II, or Vietnam, or Iraq or Afghanistan. But is anyone alive today acquainted with survivors of the 1918 Spanish Flu?

If memory of the destruction wrought by that disease no longer exists in our current collective imagination, we can still glean wisdom from ancient sources. The Hebrew Bible, as it turns out, made the connection between war and pandemic long ago.

In Psalm 91—known as the "Song of Plagues" (*shir shel pegaim*) in Jewish tradition—war and sickness occasion seismic upheavals, both individual and collective. The psalmist makes sure we grasp the connection, calling them "the hunter's trap and the deadly pestilence" (v. 3). He then elaborates a few verses later. War becomes "the terror by night / the arrow flying during the day," plague "the pestilence that stalks in the darkness / the destruction that devastates at noon" (v. 5–6). Both epitomize the material harshness of life in ancient Israel. We may chafe against the rigidity of our stay-at-home orders, but they hardly compare to the experience of ancient Israelites, who were never far from *qeteb*, "destruction." It's one of the three words (the others

are *deber* and *nega*) the psalmist uses interchangeably to signify “plague,” thereby underscoring its omnipresence in ancient life.

But Psalm 91 also contains a more important lesson. Its primary focus is not so much the hardships of war or plague themselves, but rather one’s inner orientation when living through challenging times. For the psalmist, God is our ultimate orientation, a refuge that helps us not just survive in times of crisis, but (and more importantly) grow through them. This is a promise, not a platitude, and the psalmist would know: the psalms were likely composed under taxing conditions, possibly as a response to the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century B.C. (though we’re not sure).

If war and plague repel, striking fear in the human heart, God allures. The first two verses of the psalm include six divine epithets: *Elyon* (“Most High”), *Shaddai* (“Almighty”), YHWH (LORD), “my fortress,” “my refuge,” and “my God” (*Elohai*), terms that encompass both the awesomeness and intimacy of divinity. And unlike the dangers wreaking havoc on the psalmist’s life, God is safe, offering protection in a “secret space” (*seter*) and under a protective “shadow,” like the wings of an eagle.

Why talk about God that way? Surely the psalmist’s experience had taught him that bad things could still happen to believers. Elsewhere in the psalter (take Psalm 73, for example) the psalmist clearly states that those who trust in God are sometimes worse off than those who don’t. It’s better, then, to understand Psalm 91 not as a literal promise that the faithful will never experience difficulty, or even tragedy. Suffering is real, and often inexplicable. Rather, Psalm 91 reassures its listeners, balancing the cries of anguish found elsewhere in the psalter (like in Psalm 90, which comes just before). And ultimately it offers sound advice: rootedness in God is the only way to survive life’s inevitable devastations.

Throughout history, interpreters have gotten the message. Many have given Psalm 91 an ethical thrust, in which right orientation (to God) leads to right action (love of neighbor). At the height of the Nuremberg plague in 1533, Protestant preacher Andreas Osiander drew on it for a famous sermon. Warning against fear and the instinct for self-preservation, Osiander reminded his

listeners that the only way to survive the calamity was to care for each other through acts of loving kindness. And during World War II, Jewish philosopher Max Horkheimer drew from the psalm a response to suffering, and a call to action rooted in faith: “The thought of refuge as it experiences itself in Psalm 91 awakens not merely obedience but the love for that which is other than the world and which gives meaning to life and the suffering in it. Despite everything.”

So what does Psalm 91 mean for us today? In both the Jewish and Christian traditions, Psalm 91 is a *liminal* prayer, recited during times of transition. Said before sleep, on the Sabbath and other holy days, and at funeral processions, it marks the threshold between worlds. Of course, we’re standing at a major threshold today—between who we were before COVID-19 and who we will be after. It may not be comfortable, but this is where we are.

So after the ground under our feet settles, and a new stability emerges, who *will* we be? For the psalmist, the answer depends largely on where we take refuge throughout this crisis, and on how we orient ourselves. We face a choice: we can expand our connection to God and others, or we can contract into fear and self-absorption. Social distancing doesn’t mean turning our backs on our neighbors. It means making sacrifices so they might live. Psalm 91 has been, and continues to be, a powerful prayer of hope for communities in upheaval. It shows the path from confusion to freedom. Let’s make it our own.