

## On Psalm 91, A Story

The following words were prepared by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld for a hymn sing at Princeton Theological Seminary on October 22, 2014. She offered this testimony as an introduction to a hymn based on Psalm 91. In her introduction she said, "*I've chosen a hymn based on Psalm 91 because it gives me a chance to share with you a story about growing in spiritual appreciation of Scripture that has nothing to do with academic expertise, but everything to do with pastoral care.*" Though written nearly six years ago, Kathie's testimony speaks a pastoral word that seems to be tailor-made for our current crisis. We are grateful to her for allowing us to share these words with you. *MT*

As a child I was given a book of Christian-focused true stories, and one of them featured Psalm 91. The story was set in rural Lebanon in a time of when some deadly and contagious disease was overwhelming the area and killing many children. According to the story, the women operating a Christian orphanage led the group in praying Psalm 91 daily, and no children in this orphanage got sick. "[God] will deliver you from the deadly pestilence... no scourge shall come near your tent" were the focal phrases of the psalm highlighted in the story.

I decided immediately that I did not like this story or this psalm. As a twelve year old, I thought that the isolated location of the orphanage probably had much to do with the children's health, and that the story did not speak well for a God who let others die just because they hadn't recited this psalm. The story and Psalm 91 continued to haunt and trouble me for decades, well into my years of teaching at PTS.

Finally one afternoon I took my concern to my dear friend and wise OT colleague Prof. Patrick Miller, whom many of you may remember for his pastoral acumen and his courses on the Psalms. Pat responded by telling me the story of his uncle, whose favorite and most-beloved psalm was exactly Psalm 91. His uncle recited the psalm daily, in sickness as well as in health; it was the psalm he turned to daily and asked others to read with him in his difficult last months of life; it was on his lips as he gave himself finally into God's everlasting arms. And through this *new story* I have been able to experience Psalm 91 differently: You who abide in the shadow of the Almighty; God is your refuge; you will not fear; God's angels will bear you up..."

In life and also in death, I belong to God. And in that assurance I can cry out my laments when pestilence and scourge assail not just me but any of God's beloved children across this hurting globe.

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