

## **Finding our way into a Strange New World**

### **Psalm 91**

Preached (virtually) at St Andrews Presbyterian, Kamloops, 28 June 2020

I

Grace and Peace to you. I'm really happy to be able to join you if only virtually on this Sunday morning. And, come to think of it, it's Wednesday morning for me as I film this... but, well, that's the world we live these days, right? Whatever day of the week it is, wherever you are or I am, the Spirit brings us together and we share together one faith and baptism in Jesus Christ. Now let me introduce myself since some of you don't know me: my name is Todd, I'm a Christian Reformed pastor who serves as a chaplain to the University of British Columbia's campus in the Okanagan. Being a university pastor is actually missionary work—I work in this strange mission field: the secular university campus. I share Jesus with student and professors and witness to the truth and grace of our God. I've been a missionary to the UBC community for coming on 4 years now. Before that I served for a number of years as a missionary with the Presbyterian church in south central Africa. I lived with my family in a very small, very beautiful country called Malawi. [PIC] There I taught at a seminary, training pastors and served as a pastor at large in the big African Presbyterian denomination that has several million members. This morning I'd like to take a page from my missionary life and share it with you as a story. It's nothing dramatic. In fact, in many ways it was just a story of a regular Sunday morning, but it moved me, so much that I remember it vividly some years later.

II

It was a Sunday morning about this time of year. The rainy season was over, and the countryside was still lush and green and would be for a few more months until the sun baked it brown and dusty. On this Sunday morning one of my colleagues from the seminary had asked me to fill in for him at preaching and celebrating the Lord's Supper at his small congregation about 45 minutes out of town, out in the bush. A little church of about 150 members (yes, in that part of Africa 150 members is a small church). I drove my old Landcruiser up the highway about 30 km, then turned off the tarmac onto a red dirt track that wound around farm fields and settlements. [Pic] After a few hundred meters of bumping and rattling along I saw a large lorry with a Norwegian Aid logo on its doors. Parked under a blue gum tree. Large sacks of maize were being unloaded as a crowd of people with small burlap sacks in hand formed an unruly line to get their share. Here, villagers' fields had been harvested a few months before but it had been a lean harvest, and the hunger had already come. Just a few nights earlier during family devotions at home we read to our kids a story from the Bible, a story of world that they had never known growing up in Europe, one we find all too often today. A story of scarcity. Genesis 41: "Then Egypt's seven good years came to an end and the seven years of famine arrived, just as Joseph had said....Then the famine got worse all over the country... Do you know this story from the Old Testament? Joseph, sold by his brothers in slavery in Egypt, who rises to power to save the land during a famine. "The famine was very bad. Soon the whole world was coming to buy supplies from Joseph" (Genesis 41:53-57). Bad harvest, hunger, sacks of grain.... I drove on further.

A few kilometres later my Landcruiser forded a small creek that cut through the road, two young boys ran in front, driving a dozen goats down to the water to drink. One of them stopped abruptly

in front of us, as I hit the brakes; he turned back to poke his long stick at a goat kid that was struggling to keep up. So that's what a good shepherd does, I thought to myself. "His rod and staff they comfort me." As we came up from the creek bottom there was a small settlement. A couple of women squeezed by my car on the narrow road, each with a 40 litre pail of water gracefully balanced on her head, coming back from the well at the centre of the hamlet. Then walking home. She would make this trip twice a day. Every day. Women's work in that part of the world. My colleague wanted to fill up his flask since the sun was now high and the heat was rising. He got out of Landcruiser at the well and handed his bottle to a woman to be filled from the pump. I sat silently and watched the bustle of women, children and even a few animals gathered around the water. It made me think of when Jesus met a woman at the well and asked for a drink of water. Remember the story from John 4? Come to think of it, there are a whole lot of Bible stories that take place at the well. Anyway. We drove on further.

I knew we were getting close to the church now because the road was now full of folks walking to church, men and women and kids in their best clothes. Bright chitenjes for the women and the men with crisp white shirts. The order of service I had prepared for that morning had a call to worship from Psalm 100: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise." And now I was watching people do exactly that, as if walking up to the Temple long ago, singing and praising.

We finally arrived at the church. Brick walls and a sheet metal roof. As we walked up to church past the bright jacaranda trees I noticed a few tombstones scattered on the edge of the path. Small stones marking small lives. Three-year old. Two-year old. One-year old. The prophet in the Bible dreamed of a time: "No more babies dying in the cradle, or old people who don't enjoy a full lifetime" (Isaiah 65:20). Folks all over the world are still waiting for this to come true just like they were in Bible times. Child mortality is real—we forget this in Canada don't we?

The worship service began and I preached via an interpreter. [I tried my best, really I did, but I'm not sure how it went. I told a few jokes but no one laughed; folks roared with laughter a couple times in the sermon when I wasn't telling a joke. I don't know. We call that lost in translation, right? Thank God that his presence and power can bind the pulpit and the pew, however different the people in them they may be!] During the Lord's Supper the congregation droned in Chichewa: "behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." I thought of the goat carcass I'd just seen hanging in a kiosk at the highway turnoff. Freshly slaughtered, blood was still draining from its throat as the butcher quickly skinned it amidst a swarm of flies. Is this gore what the Bible means when it talks of the "lamb of God" and not the fluffy white lamb I've had in my head since childhood? After the service an old man came up to me to talk. He told me that he had a son about the same age as me. A few years earlier his son had rented out the fields his father had left him, asked for his inheritance, then hightailed it across a few borders to South Africa. He hadn't been seen since. The father's eyes were brimming with tears as he asked me to pray for his son.

When I drove back home and my head and heart were full: full of images of women at the well; people in loud procession to the house of the Lord; famine and food handouts; little lives cut short by disease; good shepherds and lost sheep. A different world from where I had grown up. Strange to me. I felt like I was in the days of Israel. A land where grey haired fathers sit on the frontstep and wait for their prodigal sons to come back from Johannesburg. As if the pages of the Bible had swallowed me up.

### III

Have you ever had an experience like that? When the curtain between the Bible long ago and me and you here and now seems to pull back, and we find ourselves in the world of Abraham and Sarah, the shepherd David, or Mary and Jesus. Rare. Let's be frank. For most of us, most of the time the Bible feels like its describing a strange world. And it is. The Bible took place in a time and cultures very far away from ours today. This can make it hard to read and hard to understand. In fact, I suspect it's a reason why folks today don't read the Bible as much as we should. Now, no doubt, we also don't read the Bible because as sinners we are usually trying to avoid God, and since God speaks through the Bible, we don't want to bump into him there. (We don't admit this but it's true). However, we also don't read the Bible because it takes place in a strange and different world, and it's hard for us to relate. The Bible is a world of camels not cars; people walk slow on dusty roads while we rush down an information superhighway; most of us don't grow grain or tend vines or sleep in tent....it's a strange world to us and it can make it hard to understand what we read on the page.

And probably most importantly, their world—the world of the Bible—was uncertain, and totally unpredictable. And we've done a smashing job in the past 100 years of making our world safe and secure, convincing ourselves that we've got everything under control. People in countries like Canada, US, Europe—people like us—have buffered ourselves from everything and anything that might make us insecure or out of control. This is *the* huge difference between us and the Bible times.

Did you notice this morning as we read the Psalm how raw the world was. Indeed. God protect me, he says, from snare of the fowler—there's no police or bylaws back then. From the pestilence—there's no antibiotics, no health insurance. Life is off grid, so God save me from the darkness. Life is precarious—so God save me from the arrow that flies by day. Wild animals aren't in zoos or hunted—they hunt us (13). Even when the sun is shining, we're only one small step away from a fall. Life is raw. It's not controllable, not predictable, it's not safe...

And it's short, which is why the prayer goes up for long life... We think a long life is guaranteed, right? Not then, not for most people in the world.

In Bible times, ancient world, life is not buffered. There is no security or certainty. So the prayer goes up "God, my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust." This is the most basic prayer—a cry for help! A cry that we can't save ourselves or guard our own ways; Someone needs to do it for us. "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all our ways." Life is profoundly uncertain and unpredictable, so we throw ourselves on God, who is a fortress, and we trust in his Word, which is sure. That's life in Bible times.

### IV

Now, here is my one and only point this morning. This is a classic one-point sermon. I wonder if this COVID pandemic is lifting the curtain a little bit between our world and the strange world of the Bible? Might all we've experienced in the past few months might, help us enter into the Bible with fresh imagination? My life has been turned upside down these past months, and so has yours. And what it's shown us is that life is still very much raw. Our buffers are cracking aren't they?

Anxious. There is pestilence that stalks us. There is a terror in night that makes us tremble. Our governments promise to keep us safe, but can't really, can they? We don't know what the future holds, what will happen to the economy. One—student changed world. We can't predict or control. But you know we never could. We just convinced ourselves we were in charge. I think we are a lot closer to the world describe in the Bible then we thought we were. Curtain is lifting. I'm having a weekly small group for undergrads through the summer (on Zoom of course) on the Book of Lamentations, a book I chose quite deliberately. And it begins "How lonely is the city, which once was full of people..." It's a book of exile, full of weariness, trouble...and hope. This isn't so far away from us right now, right here, is it?

My hope—and I guess my challenge—is that the COVID crisis which has shattered our world in so many ways has shattered our illusion that life is certain and we control it; through these cracks we can enter the pages of Bible with renewed imagination, and there meet God and hear his word to us afresh. "Those who love me, I will deliver." Nothing else can deliver us...or protect us. Only God. Closing thought: one of the great Reformed theologians is Karl Barth. As a young man went to seminary to become a pastor, learned the Bible inside and out. But it was a historical book, an artifact of another time and place, with little to say this time and place. But when he began to pastor in a small Swiss town as World War One broke out. And on Sunday mornings while he preached the congregation could hear the guns of the western front. Booming. That close. In this crisis, Barth says, his whole world fell apart. And then, he says, for the very first in his life, "I entered the strange new world within the Bible". Could this crisis we are in do the same? Could it open a door into the strange new world within the Bible, where we hear God again, learn to cling to him desperately as the only sure thing, stand under the cross of Jesus as only security in life.

I'll leave you with that thought.

God bless you, Amen.