

“AMEN AND AMEN”

September 6, 2020

Rev. Gary G. Pinder

Text: Psalm 91: 1 – 6, 9 – 16

Blue Hill Congregational Church

From the writer of the 91st Psalm: *“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.’” (Psalm 91: 1-2)*

Words! We have so many words! We come to worship this morning with our own words - words by which we make our livings, and explain our lives. In our worship we are given more words: words to pray, words in song, words to address God, words about God, and words of trust. Our down-loaded service bulletin spills over with words. The “Word” is read, proclaimed, and in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper today, the Word is enacted.

So many words. The words are good to have. Yet, were we to meet God face to face, I’m not sure we would know what to say. In attempting to speak of the mystery we encounter in worship, we frequently confess the poverty of our own words. So, it is good to have help with the words.

The singer of the 91st Psalm gives us words by which we may speak of our faith in God in this present time of ours, when so much of our life and our security has been shaken to the core. These words are the Psalmist’s

gift to us, my friends. On this you can rely he proclaims: “*My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust.*”

To assure us of the appropriateness of these words, the Psalmist croons confidently about God’s sheltering protection. No image is too daring for this Psalmist, who will go to any lengths to bolster our confidence in God. The images are enough to tug at your heart, singing as they do of a mother’s care in this un-mothering world. The Psalmist portrays God not only as a “stony fortress” for our refuge, but also as a great eagle or hawk protecting her young under her wings. It is a powerful and beautiful image. And make no mistake about it, it is the female that displays this behavior. The book *A Guide to Bird Behavior* observes: “*The female remains in the nest. . . covering the young with her wings to protect them from [all] intruders and extreme cold or warmth*” (p.168). Both male and female hawks protect the nest, and Raptors of both genders will refuse to desert their nests, even when their nests are moved by humans. But make no mistake, the female alone adopts this posture of positive covering with pinions and protection under her wings. Out on Blue Hill Bay you can watch eagles and ospreys doing this very thing. And a boat cruising too close to a nest causes

the female bird to spread her wings over her brood and screech fiercely at the intrusion.

Back in the seventeenth century, Thomas Cage provided a lush paraphrase of the imagery of Psalm 91 in its affirmation of God's protective care:

*“His plumes shall make a downy bed,
Where thou shall rest, he shall display
His wings of truth over thy head,
which like a shield shall drive away
the fears of night, the darts of day.”*

Lush, lovely words. The words are almost too gorgeous, aren't they -- too hopeful? *“Don't trust them”*, our experience whispers. We know all too well in these months of Corona 9 virus, the fear and terror of the night; the uncertainty of each day. We know the words, love the words, but we know the words will not protect us from the dangers the world provides. Our minds tell us, “don't be taken in by the words”, don't believe these pretty words, don't expect too much.” --- Words.

We are good at words. We human creatures can do wonders with language. Hallmark cards send out our very best words for every possible occasion. We are also most well acquainted with people who always, it seems, have something to say, or at least have words to speak, *about*

anything – and - everything! At times, I find myself reminded of William Faulkner’s apocalyptic vision of the end of the world when he wrote: “*When the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock, hanging tide-less in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will be still one more sound, that of [our] puny, inexhaustible voice, still talking.*”

Now, to be sure, my friends, I have nothing against words! I’ve made my living with words: countless agendas and committee reports, sermons and prayers, prayers at the birth of a child and at a baptism, prayers before and after meetings, prayers in the living room when the diagnosis has been spoken. Prayers in the hospital hall outside the surgery wing, prayers in the waiting-room for out-patient surgery, prayers at the death bed, prayers at the funeral home, prayers at the memorial service, prayers at grave-side.

Amen!

I read Psalms and prayers and the burial liturgy from my Presbyterian Church’s Book of Common Worship. On my bookshelves in my study at home I have a collections of prayer books – from the Church of South India, from the Church of Scotland, from The United Church of Canada, The Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, and a collection of prayers from around

the world – with dog-eared pages marking the prayers that “say it exactly”, that speak to my heart, that open my eyes, that cause my heart to ache or leap with joy and thanksgiving. All these people, in all these places, praying in all these languages. I keep looking for the prayer with the magic combination of words that will open the door -- and cause God to speak!

People have been praying for a long time. The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote his poetry with a chunk of rock on his desk, a piece of tombstone from a ruined cemetery in Wurzburg, Germany, the city of his birth. The tombstone had been shattered long ago, in the 11th century during a pogrom associated with the first crusade. On this rock, engraved deep into the stone was a single word: “AMEN”. Amichai contemplated this one word, emblematic of a faith that endures over long centuries and remains resilient, even when stone fractures, and wrote:

*“Tombstones crumble, words come and go,
Words are forgotten . . .
Gods in the sky change, gods come and go.
Prayers remain forever.”*

Why do prayers remain forever? Why do we not surrender to the silence? We have more than once prayed for protection that never came, healing that never appeared. So, why do we come again and again in our

worship to pray? How do we manage this feat when so much in us and around us whispers its futility? At times, each of us has thought about quitting, about not coming to worship about praying no more. Some of us may indeed thought about it over these past months since March, months of a terrible infectious pandemic disease, months of Black lives being murdered in our cities, months of economic loss and threats that portend a world depression, months of rancorous and political animosity and division within our nation that threatens our very democracy, months of an ongoing sense of terrible loss, of depression, isolation and grief, of anger and confusion. Some of us may have thought about praying no more even this morning.

So why pray? -- I look for us to discuss and share on that topic this morning, but first let me give you my take on it.

I think and believe, my friends, we go on praying, because we hear an “amen” spoken. Other worshippers who have gathered with us each week – whether gathered in our sanctuary or now through Zoom worship, speak the “amen” and our personal, individual prayers are buoyed up by their confidence. When praying by ourselves seems impossible, sisters and brothers in the faith join our praying, and the words seem less frail and

frustrated. We come together, and when we cannot muster the strength or the courage to say for ourselves, our sisters and brothers in Christ will say for us and to us. They speak the “Amen” to all we hope from God.

But that’s not all! Prayers remain forever because we hear yet another “Amen” spoken. We hear God’s own “Amen” spoken against the clamor and the cacophony of our world and of our own words. To those who are bold to declare with the Psalmist, “*My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust*” God speaks a soft “amen”. A “Yes, let it be so!” A “ Yes, it is so. Amen!”

The singer of Psalm 91 heard this “amen” and heard more too! He heard God say, “*I will deliver, I will protect, I will answer, I will be present, I will rescue, I will honor, I will satisfy, I will show.*” We might be flabbergasted that anyone could speak with such reckless confidence and extravagance -- except, my friends, except -- we have also heard the whispered “amen” of God for ourselves. We have heard it where the Psalmist heard it, in our worship! We’ve heard it in our praying, or slipping in between the words of our worship liturgy, or even in the silence when we run out of words, we have heard God’s own “amen”. We do not hear it always, but we have heard it, and the very fact of our presence in worship

indicates we have heard it and pray to hear it once more. We don't pray alone, my friends. God speaks the final "amen" to our prayers. God speaks the final word of blessing to our worship. We know the slipperiness of words. We've known long seasons when prayers seemed unanswered, and we have known the awful silence of God. Yes! But we have also known God's "amen", the word of blessing by which God assures us our prayers are not in vain. Words are not in vain, hope and trust, not in vain, faith not in vain. God responds to our words by God's own Word. God responds to our trust with God's own self.

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper in our worship this morning, we again will see and hear God's whispered Word of love and assurance to us; we will again see and taste God's Word of presence and blessing in our lives as the bread is broken and wine is poured out; we will again receive and know God's Word of "Yes!" to us in the midst of our most common struggles and our deepest needs. We, who with the Psalmist speak, declaring: *"My refuge and my fortress; My God in whom I trust"*, are assured that we will hear finally, ultimately, God's "Amen" – God's Word of blessing, utterly unmistakable and utterly reliable. So Be It! Amen and Amen!

