THE NEW SHOFAR

The sin underneath all our sins is to trust the lie of the serpent that we cannot trust the love and grace of Christ and must take matters into our own hands. ***Martin Luther***

LENT 1

Psalm 91:1 - *Elyon*, the Most High, dwells in a secret place

The opening verses of **Psalm 91** are notoriously difficult to translate and yet, as we embark on yet another Lenten season, it is important to understand what David (or Moses) had in mind when he wrote today's psalm. He speaks of *El Elyon: Most High God* a name that stands out as a testament to divine supreme authority and sovereignty: **El Elyon, the Most High God**.

This is a name that conveys profound truths about the character and nature of God. In the Old Testament, El Elyon is mentioned over 200 times, most often in the book of Psalms. This name highlights God's supreme authority and majesty. In **Psalm 9:2**, for example, David sings praises to "*the Most High* [El Elyon]" and acknowledges the joy of dwelling in His shelter. **Psalm 21:7** celebrates El Elyon's strength and the unwavering trust placed in Him. In **Psalm 57:2,** David, while hiding in a cave from King Saul, cries out to "*God Most High* [El Elyon]," emphasizing the need to trust God during difficult times. In **Psalm 78:35,** Israel remembers God as "*the Most High God* [El Elyon] *their Redeemer*." This name reflects God's role as the Redeemer of His people, despite their shortcomings and unfaithfulness.

The Hebrew tradition says that Moses wrote **Psalm 91** as he dwelt in the secret place of the Most High God, in the "midst of the dark cloud" (**Exod. 24:18**). The "secret place" was the heart of God. The thick clouds are a "hiding place" for him (**Job 22:14**). The Hebrew word usually translated as "dwells" or "abides" has a rich range of meanings: to lodge or sleep, to inhabit, settle, stay, to set up, to cause to settle, to cause to sit; by extension, to marry, with a focus that the spouses live together, remain, bring to a place, ease, establish, married, marrying, still. All of these have a sense of permanence to them. It is not a matter of hopping in and out of a life in God as our mood and sense of wellbeing considers it useful.

The scriptures are clear: the abundance of promises made by God in this psalm (twenty-four promises in all) are all dependant on us living with a specific divine orientation to all we do. If we intentionally set about humbling ourselves and shape our lives around the commandments of the Almighty, then we will never be defeated, never be overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of life. Were we to live **Psalm 91:**1; were we to search for that "secret place" of God and make our homes there, we would experience the reality of which Paul speaks in **Romans 8:35-39**…***Nothing*** *can separate us from the love of God*… But living there is not ours by right. We are invited to dwell there, to live our lives from the perspective of the presence of God, as though we were standing

around the throne of the Risen Christ. But it is an invitation, an invitation to which we respond by Kingdom living, a way of life spelled out clearly in **Matthew 5-7**.

What is God's secret place?

The idea of there being a "secret place" is very common Hebrew idiom and usually denotes what is done between God and Israel and individual believers. Its meaning is not so much that there is a hidden place, a location we cannot find. Its emphasis is more on there being a relationship, an invitation into a presence that is indiscernible to those who are not searching in faith, not living righteously. It is hidden in the sense of being unseen by others. **Ps 31:20** describes God's goodness being hidden in the secret place of the divine presence, a place where we are alone with God, aware of His majesty, safe in his loving arms. When we live our lives from that "place" of spiritual intimacy, we can with confidence say *no evil will befall us, no plague will approach our tent.*

If we, *because* we, - the next step is ours

As **Psalm 91:9-10** assures, "***If*** we say, 'The Lord is my refuge,' ***and*** we make the Most High our dwelling, no harm will overtake us, no disaster will come near our tent."

The psalm then ends with the divine affirmation promising, "'***Because he loves me***,' says the Lord, 'I will rescue him; I will protect him, ***for he acknowledges my name***. He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation'." But there are no free rides here. What God is offering is a transformation of the perspective we have of ourselves in our present lives, of the way we understand the ups and downs of being humans in an all-too-human world. This is no guarantee of a worry free, pain free, darkness free life. It is a reassurance that God is there in the darkness and is our "secret place" in which salvation reigns. God is not a refuge if we choose to live far from Him, if we abandon hope and put our trust in human strengths and promises.

At any given moment of our day, regardless of our circumstances, we can attune ourselves to the reality of the Divine Presence and come "boldly before the Throne of Grace." The world knows nothing of this realm and is enslaved by appearances and the delusions of this realm. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (**Matt. 13:11**). The Spirit always says, "Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you" (**Isa. 26:20).** In the secret places of our heart - our "prayer closet" - we kneel in the Hidden Presence, a presence made real, tangible and potent amid the extraordinary as well as the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives.

We are made secure on account of Yahweh our God, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus The Christ who gloriously ascended over the powers of darkness. Nothing can stop Him or thwart the victory secured for those who trust in Him. **Herein lies our Lenten invitation**: through prayer, meditation, spiritual study, and intentionally increasing our spiritual disciplines, through repenting, forgiving others (all others) and ourselves; by growing in Christ-like living, the Holy Spirit will cultivate a closer relationship with God, and we will find ourselves in His presence. In that moment we will experience the power of the Risen Christ of Easter.