

Every Living Thing Needs Shelter

Psalm 61:1-4 Psalm 104:1-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The curriculum from Illustrated Ministries, which we are using for this year's Vacation Church School, including this and next Sunday, is entitled, "**Compassion Camp: What Every Living Thing Needs**". The five lessons will each have a particular focus. Shelter. Food. Water. Air. Community. The first focuses on the need for shelter. The primary takeaway from this first lesson, as described by the resource authors is:

Shelter is an essential need for humans and other living things: like us, creatures and many plants also need different kinds of protection to survive and thrive. This lesson will help participants notice how we can understand **our collective shared need for shelter when paying close attention to the world around us**. The Scriptures teach us the whole earth depends on God's care and protection (God is a rock, a fortress, and a provider). **We are called to provide shelter for one another as we inhabit a world shared with other creatures.**

I particularly like that this theme of providing shelter is extended not only to humans, but also to animals and even plants. In other words, shelter for all of God's creation.

The Bible does indeed have many verses and stories that address God's compassion in providing shelter. A great many of those references have been put into the form of poems, songs, and prayers in the Book of Psalms found in the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament. For instance, using language is lyrical, figurative, and metaphorical, the psalmist declares in Psalm 61, "**Let me abide in your tent forever, find refuge under the shelter of your wings**" (vs. 4).

But what does it actually mean to find refuge under the shelter of God's wings? First of all, **what is the purpose of shelter. Most simply, it is necessary to protect life**. Think, then, about nature and the great outdoors itself. As if watching a National Geographic special, recall all the ways that plants and animals seek and find the shelter they need to thrive and survive.

In one of the few female images used to describe the nature and character of God, God is portrayed as a mother hen, providing shelter and protection for her chicks under her wings. Reflect upon the many places you have found shelter in your own life. That includes not only the various roofs over your head, but the people who helped provide that shelter.

The curriculum makes a very important observation at this point. They do so in the context of informing those who are leading the vacation church school, not something they provide to directly address with the children. They write:

Today's theme is shelter, which may be an acute need for participants. We recommend not assuming every participant has a safe and consistent shelter. No participant should be made to feel ashamed for facing housing insecurity or an unsafe housing situation.

I applaud them for recognizing this reality faced by far too many. For some, their home is not a protective shelter. For others, there is no house or shelter to call home in the first place. This must serve as a call to action for us, including government agencies and non-profits, to help find and provide that protection and shelter. I find frustrating, however, that it's almost impossible to find any theological commentary on God's role in this scenario or those without shelter and protection. The curriculum does not address this. For **the reality we see out in the world often doesn't square with a literal understanding that God provides shelter and protection for all.**

Even biblical stories reveal this reality. After all, the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah saw its temple in Jerusalem destroyed and many inhabitants carried off into captivity and exile. And then there's John the Baptist's head on a platter, and Jesus' own execution by crucifixion. So, again I ponder, **just how is it that God provides refuge under the shelter of God's wings?**

Interestingly, I often quote Psalm 62: 5-8 in the context of a memorial service: "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God. God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken... Trust in God at all times, O people; pour out your hearts before the Lord; God is our refuge." And I add, "Yes, God is our refuge; God is our rest, our comfort, our home. That is true for each one of us here this day. It is also true for the deceased, as well, now in their eternal place of refuge, rest, comfort, and home with God." Beyond the reality we see in this world, then, **there is an eternal assurance intertwined with the promise of shelter.**

It is indeed God who has created the world in which shelter can be found. And it is true that **every living thing needs shelter, for shelter protects life.** This is where we come in. In and through God's love and compassion to all life, **we are to develop and grow in our own compassion.** And what is compassion? This is how the Compassion Camp curriculum defines it.

- I see your hurt.
- I feel your hurt.
- I help ease your hurt.

That's empathy put into action. Obvious questions for you and I to ponder, especially in the context of the need for shelter include:

- **How do you see other's hurts?**

This may include personal eyewitness accounts, social media, word of mouth, news stories, etc. It also include the sharing of prayer concerns here in worship.

- **How do you feel other's hurts?**

This is the ability to empathize. This most often involves listening to the stories of others. Also, following the works of certain activists and organizations who work on the front lines.

- **How do you help ease other's hurts?**

Answers may include, of course, prayer for them. But also, joining organized efforts, volunteering, participating in advocacy work, educating oneself, giving to local efforts, attending marches, etc. And there's always the personal response, "How can I help?"

Let us not simply think of shelter and protection, however, in a physical way.

While I think most of the scripture references to God's shelter and protection may

indeed refer primarily to physical shelter and protection, **they can and must also be seen in a mental health and spiritual way.**

When troubled, when dealing with mental health concerns, depression, anxiety, uncertainty, and trauma, recognizing the Sacred Presence of the Divine among us, within us, and for us, can serve indeed as a strong foundation, a rock, a fortress, a harbor, a place of safety and refuge. **God can be a shelter from the storms of life, many of which rage within ourselves.** At times like these, which I experience myself, I find much comfort and hope in scripture passages such as these:

Psalms 46:1-3

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
- ³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Similarly, Isaiah 43:1b-2

- ^{1b} Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
- ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

I have a magnet on the refrigerator up near the church office that I've had for decades which reflects all this. It states,

***Serenity if not freedom from the storm,
but peace within the storm.***

Perhaps that is where we find our shelter. Let us take to heart the need for shelter for all living things. Like a mother hen, God does indeed desire and seek to gather and shelter us under God's wings. **Let this be a call to compassion and to action.** What can be your role, and our role together as a community of faith, in helping to provide shelter: physically, emotionally, and spiritually?

I'll close now with a short prayer suggested in the Compassion Camp curriculum.

Living God,
you are our shelter and our hiding place. We are at home with your Spirit,
even when we have nowhere to go.
Be a shelter for us and all of creation today. Amen.

Amen.