“Enemies and Oppressors”
Psalm 91 (and Selected Psalms)
A Sermon Delivered by 
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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

Perhaps you remember where you were on December 14th, 2003. The scene was Baghdad, Iraq and Saddam Hussein, notorious for his decades of cruelty and defiance, had just been captured. At a specially-called Press Conference, Chief Diplomat and Coalition Leader, Paul Bremer walked up to the podium, cameras snapping wildly and journalists leaning forward, and said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, we got him!” Immediately, a riotous cheer went up in the room as journalists and military men and women roared in applause celebrating the downfall of this villain and the great work of those who captured him. But the most compelling scene in that room that day wasn’t the applause and celebration of our own people; it was the reaction of a handful of Iraqi men who were there. Standing to their feet, they erupted in shouts and began raising their arms, waving their hands, tears in their eyes, shouting in their own language words of justice and reckoning. For them, this wasn’t just a moment of celebration; it was a release! You see these were men who’d suffered under the brutal fist of Saddam’s regime for years, men who in some cases had seen family and friends killed and tortured, men who for decades had felt helpless under the weight of a ruthless oppressor. And now in a moment of vindication, they could finally proclaim the destruction of their enemy.

As I watched this, what struck me was this sense that I was witnessing something that I’d seen before. I couldn’t put my finger on it at first; and it surprised me to feel this way. But I was sure as I watched the reaction of these Iraqi men, so charged with a sense of justice and vindication, I was sure that I was witnessing something I’d seen somewhere. And that’s when it began to dawn on me. This image of triumph at the demise of evil – this satisfaction at the downfall of a villain – this this ovation in the face of justice being done to a brutal man…I HAD seen this before - many times. I’d read about it in that little book tucked in the middle of our Bibles called the Psalms.
From the very earliest days, the Psalms have been the lifeblood of worship for the people of God, and the prayer book of the Bible. The congregation of Israel, Jesus and his disciples, the early church, and believers today have turned to the Psalms time and again for strength and comfort; and with good reason. The Psalms teach us to trust God in the midst of fear or trouble. They teach us to cease striving and know that God is. They assure us that God will not leave us without direction, but will counsel us with his eye upon us. But you know just as often as the Psalms comfort us they also disturb us – striking us in the face like the heat of a furnace. To open the doors of the Psalms is to look into a world not only filled with green pastures and quiet waters, but a world burning with anger - where enemies lurk in the shadows, where evil-doers are ready to devour us; where liars and false witnesses breathe out threats; where oppressors make war against us. And more often than not, when faced with such enemies, the Psalmist’s response is unequivocally violent. He hopes for their destruction; he longs for their downfall; he calls on God to deal ruthlessly with his enemies, rejoicing in their punishment, their capture, and even annihilation. That’s what I saw in Baghdad that day.

We get a glimpse of this in our Psalm this morning – Psalm 91. After the Psalmist describes the perfect peace of abiding under the shadow of the Almighty, and of being lifted up on eagles’ wings, he says that while many may fall to his right and left, it won’t happen to him, for he only has to open his eyes and he will see the recompense, the payback of the wicked. In other words, these evil-doers will get what they deserve and I’ll be there to watch it! But that’s only the beginning. In Psalm 143, for example, after proceeding for eleven verses in language that brings tears to one’s eyes, the Psalmist, almost like an afterthought, adds, “And in your loving-kindness, O Lord, slay my enemies, and destroy those who afflict my soul.” (That would make for an interesting pastoral prayer one morning) In Psalm 139, after marveling that he is fearfully and wonderfully made, after praising God for even thinking of him, David says with an almost winsome childishness in the middle of his prayer, “And will you not destroy the wicked O God?” as if such a simple remedy had not occurred to the Almighty. Even in our beloved Psalm 23, a Psalm that’s almost universally read at funerals as an image of comfort, we suddenly run into a disturbing line. After green pastures, and quiet waters, and confidence in the valley of the shadow of death, we hear, and “thou shalt prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” One translator says it’s like David is saying, O Lord, You’ll spread me a feast while my enemies are forced to look on.” You can almost hear the enjoyment in his voice.

Christians haven’t always been sure how to feel about these violent Psalms. On the one hand, we know that there is a place for the right and swift use of force. If we’re seeking to restrain evil and punish wrong-doers, the use of force is actually a good and praiseworthy thing, deserving of honor (Romans 13
tells us this). Thomas Aquinas, in his great Summary of Theology, places his thoughts on Just War under the chapter “Acts of Charity,” suggesting that war, when carried out to protect innocence, is an act of love. I would agree. But when we read the Psalms, we see something more than the noble duties of a soldier or Marine. We see a visceral anger and violence that’s quite frankly hard to process. When we read Psalm 137, for example, we recoil, we shudder as the Psalmist speaks of razing the Babylonians to their very foundations and even dashing their children against the rocks. It’s hard for us to even imagine such a scene. We turn to our New Testament and hear such a different message. We see Jesus welcoming the little children and standing in the midst of those who hate him, saying things like, “love your enemies, bless those who persecute you, do good to those who do you evil.”

One way to deal with these violent Psalms is to just leave them alone…avoid them altogether. Just focus on the passages that speak of quietness and beauty and comfort. Just read those texts which speak of peace and a good report, which make us feel good. But that wouldn’t quite do it, because we know that somehow if these violent Psalms are in our Bible - if God, in His providence, has allowed them to remain in the canon of scripture, then they must carry some purpose, some value for us in our lives. 2nd Timothy 3:16 teaches us this, saying that “all Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness that the man of God might be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” How then do we understand and appropriate these violent Psalms in our lives so that we might grow in righteousness and be thoroughly equipped for every good work? That is the question.

The first step is to understand a basic rule that undergirds these Psalms. C.S. Lewis whose Reflections on the Psalms is a classic, says that there is a general rule in the moral universe that “the higher we are, the more we are in danger.” What he means is that the higher and greater our moral convictions are about something, the more likely we are to feel wrath and indignation when that something is maligned or attacked. Now the classic example of this is Peter. No one who has studied the lives of the disciples would disagree that of all the disciples, Peter is the one with the greatest, most forceful convictions. It’s Peter alone who gets out of the boat and walks on the waves to Jesus. It’s Peter alone who confesses that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God. It’s Peter alone who follows Jesus into the courtyard when the others run away. To read the life of Peter is to be swept up by a man of courage and conviction and fierce devotion to Christ. And so we’re not surprised that when Jesus is betrayed and encircled by the mob, it is Peter who brandishes a sword and tries to kill one of the captors. Jesus rebukes Peter for this because that’s not how God’s redemption will come about, but Peter’s actions come from conviction and loyalty.
You see, the greater our passions, the greater our convictions - the greater our wrath and indignation when those convictions are attacked; and the greater our satisfaction when justice is done to evil-doers. Right or wrong, it’s a moral law of the universe. This is important to understand, because it means that when we read these violent Psalms, and hear the Psalmist ask God to destroy his enemies, or cut out their lying tongues, or rain fire and brimstone upon their heads, it’s not because the Psalmist is farther from God, but because he is nearer to Him. The presence of indignation and passion, and even wrath suggests not a lower type of man, but as Lewis says, “a higher one, one whose soul is filled with some great Cause to which he is willing to subordinate his appetites, his fortune, and even his own safety.”

Just a couple of weeks ago eminent Catholic Theologian, Christopher West came and spoke to the Catholic Midshipmen Club on the Theology of the Body. It was a wonderful address on our ultimate design and destiny. He started talking about the passions that drive us, which of course got all the Mids’ attention. He said this… “The man who is lost in his passions, is NOT AS LOST as the man WHO HAS LOST HIS PASSION.” That the passions and the anger of the Psalmists go too far at times is perhaps true. But the absence of anger, the lack of passion, that tepid indifference that too often passes for Christian charity, is a far more alarming symptom. Remember what David said - “Zeal for your house consumes me [O Lord] and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.” The Psalms first off confront us with this question of conviction and passion.

But there is another use of these violent Psalms for our lives. That is, these Psalms show us how to deal with our own sin… and this is their real power. I remember many years ago when I was a chaplain to the 2nd Battalion 4th Marines, I was visiting some Marines out in the field when I heard a dreadful shouting noise a few hundred feet ahead of me. I ran up to find a group of Marines leaning in around a young Marine who was busy taking apart and putting back together his 50 caliber machine gun. As the young man went through his steps, his squad-mates were literally inches from his face, shouting and screaming at the top of their lungs. The Marine wasn’t doing anything wrong. It was a training exercise. The object was for the Marine to successfully make his weapon ready to fire in the midst of the stresses one might experience in combat. And so his buddies were shouting, screaming, whispering even in his ears, taunting him trying to distract and intimidate him. I walked away and it occurred to me what a vivid picture this is of the Christian life. We are busy at our tasks, trying to be faithful to God to what He’s called us to do, and surrounding us are all kinds of forces and influences, SPIRITUAL ENEMIES, seeking to derail us. There’s more to life than meets the eye.
In Ephesians 6 we learn that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” 2nd Corinthians tells us that “the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world; but on the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds and arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.” And what are those enemies that set themselves up against the knowledge of God? We know them: Pride, jealousy, contempt, resentment, indulgence, envy, lust, power...the list could go on. THESE are the enemies of our souls; and they are often just as sinister, just as fierce and just as unrelenting as the ancient enemies who attacked the upright in heart. But here’s the message. God has not left us defenseless. We have the Holy Spirit, we have Christ in us the hope of glory...AND...as a very practical help, we have this wonderful little prayer book in the middle of the Bible called the Psalms.

Here’s how it works - when pride raises its ugly head and seeks to make us resent someone, we don’t invite it in, we throttle it, going to the Psalms, like Psalm 143 which says, “In your unfailing love, silence my enemies O Lord, and destroy all my foes, for I am your servant.” When lust enters the picture, we don’t stop and look, we remember the words of Psalm 119 and make them our own, crying out, “Depart from me evil-doers that I may obey the command of my God!” When jealousy or contempt begin to root themselves in our relationships, we recognize them for what they are - arrows of the enemy, and we say with the Psalmist from Psalm 5, “Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with destruction. Their throat is an open grave.” When fear or doubt or worry or unbelief begin to whisper to us, we don’t just listen, we remember that like David, we too are surrounded by false witnesses breathing out violence and threats and lies, and we cry out saying, “Cut off my enemies O Lord, remove their lying tongues.” Even with some of the most horrible passages like Psalm 137 that I mentioned earlier that speaks of destroying the children of our enemies – these can also be used. C.S. Lewis, commenting on this very passage, says that if we know ourselves, we know that in our inner lives are indeed infantile things – the embryonic beginnings of secret indulgence or compromise that if allowed to grow to maturity will ruin us! Their tempting voices seem so tiny and helpless whimpering to us to pet them and hold them, caudle them. Against all such little sins the Psalmist’s advice is the best – “Dash them on the stones! Dash them to pieces.” “Cut them off that they might have dominion over me.” “For if I regard iniquity in my heart [David says] the Lord will not hear me.”

Here’s the bottom-line: the Christian life is not suburban, it’s warfare. We don’t just automatically grow in holiness and righteousness. Jesus said, “the kingdom of heaven suffers violence and it is the violent who take it by force.” He wasn’t talking about crusades or religious wars or anything
of that nature. No, He was saying what the ancients knew and what we in our affluence and ease so often forget – if we are to inherit the kingdom of God and be used of God as effective instruments, it’s going to take an act of war - war against the sins which so easily entangle us, war against the vices that we so often tolerate, war against the enemies of our soul which we so casually and dangerously welcome in. Let me lay this out in practical terms: if you’re looking for something to give up at Lent – how about excuses. Rather than cauldle our sins, and make excuses for the things we permit ourselves to think and do, let’s be Psalmists and cut these things off at their knees! Let’s say with the Psalmist, “Revive me, O LORD, for Your name’s sake! For Your righteousness’ sake bring my soul out of trouble. In Your mercy cut off my enemies, and destroy all those who afflict my soul; for I am Your servant. Brothers and Sisters, God’s great encouragement to us today is to pick up this little prayer book called the Psalms, and read them. Read them, quote them, ponder them, memorize them, recite them, pray them. Cry them aloud in the dark hours of the night. Preach them to your spirit in the waking light of the morning. Sing them in the midst of the noon-day hour. Rouse and defend your spirit by their truth. For they are God’s weapon given to you and me for training in righteousness that the man of God might be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

They that have ears to hear, let them hear what the spirit is saying to the church. Amen.