

“Unfailing Kindness in Distress”

Death. We all think about it at times. Some more than others. Will it be quick? Will it hurt? How will it happen to me? The big one: what comes after death? Have you ever thought about all of the different times that you could have died? Seriously, think about all of the different ways or moments that if one little thing went differently, you would not be sitting here today.

When I was in middle school my family went to Niagara Falls. We were walking down a path right next to the Niagara River where there were some rocks in the river that you could walk along. And I was young and (in my mind) invincible, so I was going downhill jumping from rock to rock getting faster and faster until I was going too fast. I panicked a little and barely made it back to the path. I thought about that for a while after that. If one small thing goes differently, I slip and break a leg, float down the river and am not standing here today.

That one stands out the most for me. There were other times where I look back and think of the close calls. You can probably do the same thing, and we could compile a huge list of times where if one little thing went differently, none of us would be sitting here today. When you add to that the times when you don't even realize just how close you were to death, then our reading for today from Psalm 18 hits especially close to home. **“The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.”**

King David understood this as well as anyone. He's the one writing it, so that makes sense. He wrote these words near the end of his life. These same words are written down in 2 Samuel 22 as well. He had fought lions and bears, had been chased by King Saul, had his own son Absalom betray him, and had fought many different armies throughout his life. Death was all around him. For him – even more than for us – if one tiny thing goes differently and he could have been dead.

We talked about that for us as well. One thing goes differently – a gas line leaks, a wire breaks, a car veers into your lane – and you are not sitting here today. Of course, death is not the only distress that hits us and overwhelms us. Even more dangerous than death surrounding us is the torrent of destruction that is our sinful natures.

King David knew this as well, having given into that temptation when he sinned with Bathsheba. He writes in Psalm 18: **“Torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.”** Torrents is a powerful word. Think of torrential waves – heavy waves – crashing down on the rocks. Torrential snowfall is something we can relate to around here, when it snows so heavily that you can't see more than 10 feet in front of you

Doesn't temptation to sin come at us like that as well? And sometimes it's easy to stay away from the torrent of temptation. A friend says to you, “Just rob a store with me!” Ok, you're not going to do that.

But that torrent of wickedness and temptation keeps crashing down on us, pouring over us and we can't see in front of us and what we should be avoiding. “Just have a few more drinks.” “You can't honestly believe that sex before marriage is wrong in our day and age!” These temptations to sin are everywhere.

And what about temptations to stress out – to get so caught up and depressed about the wickedness in this world? The prophet Elijah was someone who knew a little bit about stress. He was at the top, having just defeated the prophets of Baal with God at his side. But then depression struck him. He felt alone. He was in distress.

Torrents or waves of wickedness surround us. David says, **“The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me.”** For Elijah, for David, for us, sin is all around...death is all around...distress is all around crashing on us like those torrential waves and torrential snowfall.

I know I can relate to what David is saying here. Moving to different places and working with different congregations, I ask what if the relationships aren't the same, or what if the work is too different. And I'm sure every one of you has had thoughts like this in the past as well. Maybe here at Trinity you have similar thoughts of distress when a family leaves or a new family arrives. What will we do without them? How will the new family fit in? Or maybe you were moving to a new place or starting a new job. What if you don't transition as well as you hope or don't get along with your boss? What if your business doesn't do as well as you need it to do?

Do you think Jesus could relate to these words? Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent – the time of year we march to the cross with Christ. On that march to the cross, don't you think Christ felt the cords of the grave, the snares of death and Satan tightening around him? As his Father forsook him, wouldn't he have felt the torrents of wickedness and sin fall on him?

It's these questions – these times of distress that lead us back to where David goes. When he is overwhelmed by distress and destruction and wickedness, he turns to his LORD – to the powerful God who hears him and shields him. Our God promises to shield us as well because of that march that our Savior made to the cross.

David writes in the Psalm: **“In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.** Our God knows our distress. He tells us that he hears us, and he says what he does for us.

In this reading there are 7 different terms that describe how God supports us: **our strength...rock...fortress...deliverer... shield...horn of my salvation... stronghold.** We could easily talk about each one of these in detail, but let's just look at a couple. God is our rock. Although torrents of wickedness and distress crash down on us, he is the rock that stands firm and is not swayed by any of it. We find refuge in that rock in his Word. The promises and the love that he shows us in his Word never move or change.

God is also called the horn of our salvation. Armies of old would use the horn as a rallying point. The horn would blow and everyone attacks together, encouraged by those around them. God is our rallying point. He pushes back the waves of distress by giving us his Word. We find refuge in him.

Think again of those instances in David's life where if one little thing went differently he would have died. God was watching over him the entire time. He sent people into David's life to support him. His friend Jonathan was there to support him throughout his life. When David was older and worn out from battle, one of his soldiers defended him from a giant Philistine – not

Goliath – who had sworn to kill David. Nathan the Prophet had brought God’s law to him exactly when he needed it.

God has given us similar blessings. Think of the people God has given you to encourage you in times when you would be overwhelmed. He has given us friends and family who support us. He has given you fellow believers in these pews who support you. But far greater a gift, he has given us his Son. That’s why David can write what he does in verse 50 of this Psalm, and why we can take such comfort from it. **“He gives his king great victories; he shows unfailing kindness to his anointed, to David and his descendants forever.”**

God says what he has done for us. He has given us his anointed one – the unfailing kindness, mercy, and love of our Savior – willingly faces torrential waves of destruction. We talked about those torrential waves that can blind us. Those waters seem oppressive. This is similar to temptation and distress pouring down on us and blinding us. But God has given us a different kind of water. He has washed us with the waters of baptism. These waters wash away all sin and all distress. We have the assurance of forgiveness and God’s unfailing kindness.

That is the promise that God makes to us, that as we face distress and are overwhelmed, he gives us his unfailing kindness. He gives us each other to support and encourage each other. He has given us a Savior who went to the cross for us, who was killed by those torrential waves of wickedness, and who now shields us. It’s in his name that we go to the cross as well, looking always to him. Amen.

And may the peace of God, which passes all of our understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in the true faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.