

“On Forgetting and Remembering”
Remembrance Day Reflection on Psalm 91
Sunday November 5, 2006
Trinity United Church, Ottawa
Rev. Ellie Barrington, M.Div.

***“Though thousands fall about you, near you it shall not come.
For to the angels is given a command to guard you in all your ways.”***

Today we commemorate Remembrance Day as a country at war. I feel startled still, hearing myself say that. We are a country at war. Is that startling news to you too?

As David said on Wednesday at Scripture Circle, “This war has come on very gradually and we are suddenly waking up to it now.” Perhaps most of us preferred to think Canada was in Afghanistan for peacekeeping and reconstruction - the gentler military role that we Canadians are comfortable with. The hard news is that we are part of an invading force that now can’t withdraw immediately with honour, because we would leave Afghanistan’s nascent civil structures unconscionably undefended.

But Canadians have noticed recently, that we are at war. Because body bags are coming home. And young men are returning bearing the weight of war trauma. The casualties are counting up. Today’s news is becoming anxiously reminiscent...of other wars.

Wars that we vowed to remember, so that there would be no more wars! Wars that we vowed to remember so that innocent young Canadian soldiers in the trenches and the jungles and the tunnel-ridden desert mountains of southern Afghanistan, would not need to cling desperately to psalms. Wars that we vowed to remember so that mothers and wives and daughters today would not lose their irreplaceable sons and husbands and brothers. Wars that we vowed to remember so that ‘shell-

shocked' soldiers would not bring home to their Canadian families the imploding rage and gruesome nightmares of their post traumatic stress disorder - unable to forget repressed emotional pain that we now understand can ricochet through family life for decades and generations.

Never again, we cried! Didn't we?!

I guess we forgot?

So what then is the meaning of Remembrance Day, in 2006?

And what is the real promise of Psalm 91, in the very real war time of today?

Its not difficult to see why the padres of our forces chose this psalm to comfort and inspire our soldier combatants. It promises rescue and honour and refuge from fire. It is an en-couraging prayer, that counters terror with trust in God as protector. It is a poem made holy and powerful by repetition, proven to Jews and Christians by the centuries of survived suffering.

How often have we been lifted beyond our fears by the chorus of this psalm's song? How many of us have felt raised up from the worst moments of loss on those eagle's wings? Saying it, singing it, we *do* often experience that blessed winged lift of Spirit strength, don't we?

But do we hold that angels will protect our soldiers from the suicide bombers? Will a miracle move our guys out of the way of friendly fire? Surely, we aren't hoping that God will raise our soldiers up on the American Eagle's wings?!

One biblical commentator on this psalm notes that "All hymnody faces the grave danger that it will promise things that are not true and that it will raise hopes and expectations not easily fulfilled" - even by God! If we offer our psalms as opiates

or escapist fantasy, they will lose their potency.

The potency of Psalm 91 is perhaps not in any personal promise of miraculous rescue, so much as its promise of God's presence amidst traumas and terror and war. I find its most reliable 'rescue power' in the fulfillable promise of hope and 'not aloneness', when one is under fire. The promise of the psalm *is* fulfilled, when we say it in fear and are suddenly assailed by an indescribable calm. We *are* rescued indeed, when we pray it in desperation and feel invaded by new courage. God *is* our refuge once again, when we intone the words of the psalm and then inexplicably encounter some 'holy helper.' When these things occur, as you and I know they do, then this Psalm of Trust in God is proven. Its promise of rescue is made real and reliable. So we *will* say it again, with even more energy and faith next time we fear, trusting that God can transform our fear into a future.

That is how prayer works. This is the reliable promise of the psalm. The padres know. I hope the soldiers and their families do too!

Perhaps the meaning of Remembrance Day for me today is that in times of war, we must remember to pray. To pray that families wounded and traumatized by war be able to heal and blessedly forget, while the civil and military leaders remember the real human costs of war. To pray for creative, constructive solutions to oppression and terror. To pray for terrorists and 'enemies' too. To pray with the Prince of Peace, who chose the radical, death-defying path of nonviolence, in response to the conflict in his time. Remember Him? On Remembrance Day, let us not forget Him. He came singing 'Peace!'

VU # 359 He Came Singing Love...He came singing peace.