The text for this sermon is ***not*** the Gospel Lesson for today. Our text is not the Epistle lesson either. It's not even our Old Testament Lesson, but it does come from the Old Testament of God's Word. And that is our Psalm for the day which we spoke responsively earlier in this morning's service. It's always good to spend some time in the Psalms. That's because the book of Psalms is literally the song book of God's people. From the tabernacle worship of the Old Testament to the house gatherings of the early Christian church, from the writings of Martin Luther to the newly published hymns and praise songs of today, the Psalms have universally played a central role in the worship of God's people.

As we spoke together the words of Psalm 91, did any of the word pictures, the sentences there ring a bell? How about "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone"? Sure. We heard Satan quoting those very words of Psalm 91 when he attacked Jesus with one of his temptations in our Gospel reading. But, in addition, you may have heard these words, as well as others from Psalm 91 in a well-loved hymn which we'll sing during the offering today.

But before we focus any further on Psalm 91, let's take a quick step back to the Psalm that comes right before it. Psalm 90 also brings us back to last Wednesday. On Ash Wednesday, we came face-to-face with our mortality as together we crossed the threshold into the church season of Lent. As the ashes were pressed upon your forehead or hand, you heard the sobering words "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Psalm 90 has words that sound just like that: "You return man to dust and say, 'Return, O children of man!'" (v. 3). The writer of that Psalm laments just how short life is and how real God's wrath against sin is. It is a just and righteous wrath that carries with it an inevitable, inescapable death for every human being. It is not a comforting idea to think about but it's nonetheless true: Every new day brings us closer to the reality of our own death. "So, teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom", we pray in verse twelve of Psalm 90.

Thankfully Psalm 91 comes immediately after this, with the words of assurance and comfort that we desperately need. In Psalm 91 God's people in sure faith and strong trust, call upon the Lord God for salvation. Here the psalm writer prays with confidence amid the real terrors of the night and the dangers that darken our doorstep even in the daytime. God's people of every age have faced the old evil foe, but they've never faced him apart from God's promise of

protection. And so, it is for you, dear child of God. This psalm provides a striking and powerful contrast from the one before it. Psalm 90 speaks of the sadness of death. Now, in Psalm 91, we are invited to the joyful, confident confession of ***refuge*** in the shadow of the Almighty. In Him we are safe, now and always, no matter what comes our way.

Unfortunately, this sure confidence, this strong, unwavering trust, does not come naturally to us. From day 1 of the fall, the old Adam, our old sinful nature, prefers to put the Lord to the test. The slithering serpent Satan likes to chip away at our confident faith. He does it to turn you and me from ***trusting*** God to ***testing*** God. He knows your weak points, your vulnerabilities. And so, Satan twists God's commands and promises, with the goal of plunging us into the depths of doubt and uncertainty.

In 2012, Jamie Coots, a "snake-handling" pastor in Kentucky, died of—you guessed it—a snakebite! Coots was the star of a National Geographic TV reality show called *Snake Salvation*. He believed he had a special anointing from God that protected him from any harm from the snakes that he handled. Why not? Doesn't God promise that in verse 13 of today's psalm and also in Jesus' words to His apostles at the end of Mark's Gospel (Mk 16:18)? Upon Coots's death, the network released a statement to CNN noting his devout faith even in the midst of the dangers he faced.

Was Coots's snake handling a sign of a devout faith, or rather was it reckless behavior that misunderstands and tests the promise of God? Please understand, Psalm 91 is not an invitation to "test" the Lord by seeking out danger and peril at every opportunity. That's a total misunderstanding not only of this verse, but of the entire psalm. That was actually Satan's twisting of this psalm when he foolishly attempted to ensnare our Lord. That's his game plan for you too.

Yes, the Lord indeed promises protection in the midst of dangers. He promises that nothing can separate us from His love in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:39). But nowhere is this an invitation for us to put Him to the test. Jesus proved that when He outwitted Satan with a ***correct*** understanding of Scripture: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Lk 4:12).

Take a look at your life, as I also take a look at mine. In what ways have you tested God with your reckless behavior, rather than trusting Him with a confident faith? Do you take refuge under the shadow of His wings for forgiveness, or do you use His forgiveness as a crutch, a license to continue living recklessly in the sins you love? Those pet sins may include the following rationales that we use: "What's the harm in 'borrowing' someone else's

answers for the test?" Or "No one is going to notice if I make a 'mathematical error' on my tax returns that gives me a really big refund." Or perhaps it's the temptation that sharing the latest rumor about someone you don't like is no big deal. The list of our pet sins could go on and on. Whatever your sin, even if you think they are just "small, unnoticeable sins", there's only one thing to do with them: Repent. Repent. Recognize Satan's tactics that so easily ensnare you. Confess your sins of weakness. Admit defeat. But don't walk away ***defeated***.

Sadly, you and I don't always walk away the victor over sin and its temptations. But your ***defeat*** doesn't mean you're ***done*** for. That's the blessed gift of your Baptism into Jesus. It's a Baptism into His death and His resurrection. It's a Baptism into His victory, to share in His victory, no matter how many times you've been ensnared and defeated. Living in daily repentance and faith, you can enjoy the refuge of His victory as you receive His inexhaustible gifts in Word and Sacrament. Yes, you can admit defeat, yet still live in victory, Christ's victory.

What's His victory all about? The Son of God was tempted for real, just as you are. Satan led him to the pinnacle of the temple and tempted him with the very words of today's psalm: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone' " (Lk 4:9–11). But Jesus took refuge in the promise of His heavenly Father. He held fast to God's promise rather than fall prey to Satan's lies.

Still, that wasn't the real victory. The devil went away from Jesus "until an opportune time" (Lk 4:13). And what more of an opportune time was there than when our Savior hung from the pinnacle of the cross? There, the temptation intensified as He looked down at those who shouted, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (Lk 23:37). But He wasn't there to save Himself. He was on that cross to save you and to save me. To save us from sins like cheating and stealing, gossiping and slandering, and any and all other sins we try in vain to justify. Jesus trusted, even then, even giving up the shelter of His heavenly Father, so that you would dwell in the shelter of the Most High forever.

With this in mind, we're free to enter this season of Lent with ***confidence***. We have the confidence of a God who grants us refuge in the victory of His Son. How fitting to begin the Sundays in Lent with this powerful, comforting psalm. The psalms are prayers. So pray them, just as God's people have always prayed them, even as your Lord Jesus prayed them. Pray them in the confidence of God's promise fulfilled in Jesus. He is your refuge. Jesus is the shelter God has provided for you. You live in the shadow of His wings, in His victory. Call upon

Him for salvation here and now, at the pinnacle of temptation, and even in the depths of defeat. In the name of Jesus. Amen.