

***The Shelter of Mother Bird***

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Carrie Starr

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Autumn Gallegos Greenwich]

We want to welcome Carrie Starr. She'll be providing us with a sermon today. She has been with us before. Carey is a graduate of Northeastern seminary where she's currently pursuing a doctorate in leadership, scripture, and spiritual formation. She serves as the director of advancement for Northeastern, while also teaching and developing women for leadership at Roberts Wesleyan. She's the author of 3 books, the mother of 3 children, and she's happy we only have two services instead of three. Let's welcome Carrie.

[Voice of Carrie Starr]

I promise not to give any spoilers, but in the new Star Wars movie, the young Rey, in her jedi training, is sitting in the meditative prayer posture, and she's got her eyes closed, and she's repeating over and over again: "Be with me. Be with me. Be with me." Now you don't have to be a Star Wars fan to resonate with her prayer, with that meditation of longing for others to be with us, of someone to be with us in our times of trouble and pain and difficulty. And she's frustrated because, you know, she says "be with me, be with me" and she kind of opens her eyes and she's like, "they're not with me. I'm alone." And I think we often, we can resonate with that feeling of being alone. This is where the book of Psalms brings me comfort. When I was in high school a kid in my chemistry class always bragged about this thing that happened in his church on a Friday night. And I remember thinking: what exciting thing happens at your church at Friday nights that, like, a teenage boy is so excited that he's got to get to? But after many weeks of him bugging me about it I went and it was his church youth group. And every Friday night we would, like, play some games in the gym, and then we would come back into the sanctuary, we'd sing some songs, we really liked that, and then the past the youth pastor would read from the Bible, and then he would challenge us, and he would say: "Raise your hand if you've read your bible 7 days this week!" And all the kids raised their hands. And I thought that was super weird because, I own a Bible, but I didn't know you, like, read it. Like I love to read. I really like books, but this was, like, a shelf-dwelling book. And so I thought: Ok, I felt funny and like I was the only one not raising my hand so - but I didn't want to lie about it

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because I'm a Girl Scout. So I decided that I need to start reading the Bible, basically because of peer pressure. And so I started reading the book of Psalms and I discovered something I didn't expect to find.

So when I was a kid, my father left our family before I was born. My mom was actually pregnant with me when my dad walked out. And so I grew up without a dad, and that was always a source of pain for me, and it made me feel incomplete and I always longed to know and be close to my dad. Well as I started reading the book of Psalms, I actually discovered the Father I had been looking for. I learned things about God that I didn't realize, and there was a depth to His character that I found very attractive. I also loved the way the Psalms are written. Not only are they poems, which is pretty cool, but they're just full of all of this emotion. Like the whole full range. There's pain and there's suffering, but there's also joy, and delight, and adventure and it really drew me in. And now as an adult looking back and looking at them I can see why. There's 150 of these suckers and a third of them are depressing. They're real. These are real people living in real time being really raw and honest about what they're going through! And the other thing I love about them is that, the Psalms, when you look at them overall, they tell the stories of how God has worked in the past.

So there are these amazing stories of how God has provided and what He's done, and then they talk very candidly about what's going on in the present. What are the challenges, what are the difficulties, as well as the joys. They're very raw and right here. They also are full of hope. There's this anticipation of God working in the future. There's this belief that God does care, that God will act, that there will be an intervention, and there's hope that comes from that. And you find all three of those in the Psalms. So this morning, Autumn read for us Psalm 57, and I love this Psalm. There are a few things in here that really encourage my heart. So the first thing, the very first verse says: "Be merciful to me Oh God. Be merciful to me." The Psalms are really repetitive, part of that's poetry, and part of that is - think about this, whether you have kids or not - you know kids are not afraid to repeat themselves to get what they want, right? Like they will just say the same things over and over and over and over again, and they will just keep doing it until you are like: "Ok! I'll give you your way." This is the state of the Psalmist. Like, the Psalmist is just like, not afraid to look undignified like a kid. We all grow up maybe a little too quick and we're not afraid to stay in this humble posture of a child, but this Psalmist is humbling... and I'm going to say herself, by the way. I think this, I think the scripture is written for all of us, and as a woman I read this from my perspective so I'm going to read this from a woman's perspective. It says up top here that, you know, it's related to David. And there are parts of this Psalm that I think relate to his story, but I think it can relate to all of us where we

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are. So I'm going to read it as if from a woman's perspective. So, "be merciful to me oh God. Be merciful to me for in you my soul takes refuge."

Now, if you were a Hebrew living in ancient Israel and you used the word "soul" it would mean something different than the way you and I use "soul" today. Today we talk about our body and our mind and our soul as separate things, but the Hebrews did not see themselves that way. They didn't separate into parts like that. When they use the word soul this means the whole self. This Psalmist is saying, "for in you my whole being takes refuge." So she's talking about her mind and the thoughts in her mind. She's talking about her physical body and the safety of her physical body as well as her, what we would call her spirit or soul today. And she says that, she's saying I entrust my whole self. I put my whole self in the refuge of you and then she gives us this beautiful metaphor that we don't see a ton in scripture. A lot of the metaphors we see in scripture are masculine God. It's masculine God, it's "He." But I love this because this gives us a rare glimpse of God as feminine. The idea of a mother bird. Because she says: "In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge till the storms of destruction pass me by." Now there are actually 5 different Psalms that use this metaphor, and we see this idea of God's wings throughout Scripture and this image of mother bird is as a protector and a provider.

So I don't know if you guys are into birds very much. My mom loves birds. And bird feathers are really unique because, on the outside they have this, like, waterproof kind of component. They actually have these little like, barbs at the end of them, they're really tiny so you might not see them, but they make all the wings kind of click together almost like a zipper. And that's part of what gives them that waterproof, that like protective shell. It's almost like armor. But the underside of the feathers are really like, soft and fluffy. So if you've ever had like, a down jacket or a down pillow or a blanket and they're like little fluffy feathers that end up everywhere. I had a down jacket once when I was younger and like it would just leave a trail of little baby feathers. When you're a baby bird those are the only kind of feathers... you only have that component of your feathers. The soft fluffy kind. You don't have the waterproof zip together protective kind, but mother bird does. And so when you were under the shelter of mother bird wings you and you are exposedness is against her fluffy side of the feathers, but you're surrounded by that protective outer side. So you can rest and remain in the shelter of those wings and it's a safe soft place, but there's this protective outside that's strong and stronger than what you can provide for yourself. So keep that in mind, as the Psalmist goes on in verses 4 and 6. We find out the kind of trouble she is in.

Listen to this description: "My soul is in the midst of lions. I lie down amid fiery beasts, the children of man whose teeth are like spears and arrows. Whose tongues are sharp as swords." When I hear this, I think of one of the most, like, painful things that another person can do to

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us, and that is use their mouth to speak words against us. When you think of the abusive things that people can say, harmful things, untrue things, when people say untrue things about you isn't that just like a sword through your soul? You know, think of maybe, some untrue thing it could even come from a misunderstanding, but people are saying things that are untrue about you. And how did that impact you at school, or at work, or in your family? It's like teeth, like knives. People can just use their words in such harmful ways and we just feel devastated. This Psalmist describes it as a destroying storm. You can feel destroyed with the words of someone else, and that's how this Psalm and Psalmist feels. She's in pain from destroying words of another person and she's calling out to the Lord as mother bird to protect her, to provide refuge under Her wing. And what I love about it is that she's so honest about it. This is really kind of dark. Her description in verse six, she says: "they set a net for my steps. My soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my way, but they have fallen into themselves." So she's describing her present situation. This is not safe. She's not safe, is either physically unsafe, or, at best, emotionally she's unsafe, feeling destroyed. But she's saying - she's almost doing this kind of self talk where she's saying - but I remember God, what you're like, and what you've done. In verse two she says: "I cry out to God Most High. To God who fulfills His purpose for me." So there's this sense of: "ok, I know how God has worked before, and I know that there's this sense that He's got a plan for me in the future. And I believe that. I'm going to state that as a fact. But where I am right now, this is a desperate situation." And she's very real about it.

Now this is something that we struggle with. When it comes to pain, we're not really great at dealing with pain. We tend to do one of three things with that pain. One thing we try to tend to do is maybe just kind of ignore it, right? Like just pretend it's not real. Just keep smiling. You know I had this teacher in high school who just said don't worry be happy. Like that was my theme song. Like you know, it's all good and just keep smiling. And sometimes in Christian circles even that can be like... we think there's an expectation we have to do that, right? That we always have to be happy and act like we've got it all together. So that's one way we can deal with pain. And that actually can cause more pain, can't it? When we have to pretend that we're not in pain when we really are. Or we can try to numb our pain. And there are all kinds of ways we can do that. We can do that with substances, we can do with Netflix. Like just, numb the pain. Just something from the outside to numb it and make it go away because, "I just can't take it."

But what the Psalmists invite us to do is be honest with our pain, to be real about it, to, like, acknowledge it and call it what it is. And the Psalmists invite us to be very real to God about it, which is perfect, because, you know what, God is the one who can actually do something about it! That's what the Psalms tell us: bring that pain, bring those frustrations, bring them to God, He can handle it. Sometimes we're way too polite with God. You know, like we think he's going

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to get offended or like stop talking to us or something, if we're, like, honest with him about what's going on, where the scripture makes it so clear that he already knows. You're not going to surprise him and you're actually not going to, like, offend or upset him, at least if the Psalms are true. Like I said, 1/3 of them are people being really honest about the things that bother them and they even say "God where are you?" and "how long are you going to make me go through this?" and "when is it going to stop, because I can't take it anymore." That's what the Psalmists say, that's how they speak. And that makes sense to me.

You know, for over 20 years I worked with college students, having them work together on projects. Now this might surprise you, but college students don't always get along. Like sometimes they have very different ideas about how something should get done and it was pretty common for students to be working on a project and this person's doing it this way and someone else thinks that's really the wrong way to do it and they get really upset with one another. And what do you think they would do if they're in this situation and they're really upset with that person? They come over here and they knock on my door and tell me why that person is a jerk and why they're doing it wrong and can I come in and set that person straight. And every time that would happen my reaction would be, uh I'd ask the same question, "have you talked to that person? Do they have any clue that you're upset with them? Do they know that what they're doing is bothering you or that, you know, that you would like to try this a different way?" And I would say 9 times out of 10 they would just, like, "uh no, I haven't done that..." I don't think they would be very responsive to me, you know, whatever the excuse was and I would say, "go back, talk to them, then come back with me." I mean, the worst part, sometimes they'd gather a whole group of people, right, "we all care, we all agree they're a jerk you gotta do something about them." "Ok, all of you go back and talk to that person because they probably don't even know. They can't do anything about it."

This is what we do when we're in pain, when we're frustrated and we're confused and when we don't know where the heck God is. Instead of thinking "God where are you?" we just want to feel angry or we go talk to other people about it, but we don't talk to God about it. The Psalms invite us to go right to Him with our frustrations, right to him with our complaints, right to him with our frustrations. This Psalmist is in pain. "Be merciful to me, Oh God, be merciful. For in you my soul take refuge. You're my only true source of hope and protection. I know you can help me, but I need help now. I've got people saying stuff about me. I am in pain. this isn't fair, people are trying to lay a trap for me. And I know when I look into the past that you are strong, that you can intervene, but right here, right now where I am, I can't take it anymore." I want to challenge us and invite us to be like Ray and to sit there and say, repeat it over and over if you have to: "be with me, be with me in this mess God, help me out, cover me with your wings that

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provide and protect, bring me into that safe place that you provide because I don't have it on my own, I don't have it without you.”

It's easy to forget what God has done in the past, it can almost feel like it's not even there. It's part of, for me, whenever I feel like, man, God feels a 1000000 miles away, I'm not even sure if He's real, I just don't even know. I feel like I see no evidence around me and I'm just, why am I even wasting my time with praying, that's when I go to the Psalms. Because then I read these stories of how God has worked for literally thousands of years, thousands of years, this is not some book that someone just made up last week! People have been looking into this as a source of hope for thousands of years and there are stories of historical people and historical places and recordings of how God miraculously intervened and how he met people in the ordinary and the extraordinary. And so it makes me think about the past and remember the moments that I really felt like God was *with* me and reflect on that and then it gives me the courage to say, “Ok God I need to see that now. This is where I am, this is where it hurts.” You know, just like you, maybe when you were young would go to your mom, or go to a parent, or go to a loving person in your life and say, “this is where my knee is scraped” or “this is where my head doesn't feel so good” like, show mother bird the parts that hurt, like don't ignore the pain, don't just numb the pain like it's not there, but be real about it, be honest and take it somewhere where it can be addressed or someone can do something about it. And go with that sense of anticipation that God will work in the future. The Psalms are filled with hope, even though they're full of despair, they're also filled with hope about that, God, He has a purpose for me. “I cry out to God Most High to God who fulfills His purpose for me.”

My husband is in a place right now where he's going, “I don't know what's next for me. You know, I'm kind of frustrated and I think I might want, like, a change in my life, but I don't know.” Do you know he's doing that? He's so good at this, he should be a Psalmist. Because he's saying to God, “what is next? I want to know what's next. I believe you have a next, I don't have a clue what it is, show me, show me, show me. Be with me, be with me, be with me.” He's not afraid to repeat himself like a child, not afraid to humble himself and entrust his entire soul to God and say, “I know you have a future, but I can't see what it is and I need you to show me.”

I think another thing that can help besides, like, reminding us of what Scripture says and thinking about how it's worked in the past, I know, I like to journal, so I can read, because sometimes I forget what God has done in my own life and I like to read my journals of what God has done in the past, that can help. But having another person in your life too, that's following God as well, that you can talk to and can encourage you. So, just a couple months ago, I started working with a spiritual director, her name is Janet, and she used to work with college students

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as well in ministry, and so we have a lot in common. And I meet with her once a month and I just share with her how I think God is working in my life and what's hard for me right now.

So I'm going to invite you into something really hard that's been one of my biggest challenges over the last 18 months. A year ago August, I got a phone call from my brother and I knew it was bad because my brother doesn't call me. And my mom had been at the Senior Center and she was walking out and she tripped on the curb and she fell and she smashed the back of her head on the edge of the curb. And they took her to the hospital in the ambulance and, you know, my brother said, "so this happened, but it's ok." About two hours later, I got another call, she's not ok, they did a cat scan, she's got a brain bleed, and we're rushing her to a major medical center for brain surgery. You need to get here as soon as possible and mom was 5 hours away. I got there in less than 5 hours, on the wings of an eagle I flew. And when my mom woke up, she did not know who I was. It was really scary and I felt really helpless and I said, "God where are you?" My mom is, like, one of the most loving, sacrificial people you can know. My mother bird, my original mother bird that I remember and it was very painful. Fortunately, she did improve and she was moved to rehab, she moved out of the ICU into regular and then rehab and then it was clear that Mom was never going to be the same. She's going to know who I am, she's going to know her surroundings, but her physical body doesn't work the same and her mind doesn't work the same and she's going to need more help. And how are we going to pay for it?

So, I start this really complicated, difficult process, if anyone has worked with aging parents or special needs people, there are all these services out there, but it's like, you have to navigate a maze to get them, and just when you figure out the maze, it's like it all switches and I felt like I was trying to put it together a jigsaw puzzle and someone kept taking away the pieces and hiding them from me, that's how it felt. So I finally, finally find an assisted living center for mom to live and we finally kind of get Social Security to say yup here's the money that your mom deserves, and a month later I get a letter in the mail: we've cut off her benefits. And I drive 5 hours and I have to keep my mom in the car and she can't move very easily and we got to drive to this place and go up these stairs and wait for hours and someone finally talks to us and they reinstate her benefits. This happens 3 times, just in the last 6 months. It's exhausting. If you're tired listening to me, which you probably are, I was really tired of doing it and I just wanted to say, "I quit. I don't know how to do this and it's not working and I just want my mom to have the benefit she deserves to she can, like, be ok in this place that she's finally happy and healthy."

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So, I go a third time, the people tell me, the caseworker says your mom's all set. I come home, we're getting into the holidays and I'm not planning on... I've been traveling 5 hours to go see my mom every month for 15 months straight and I'm thinking it's fine. I get another letter in the mail, we've cut off your mom's benefits and I get a call from the assisted living center saying, you know, you have a week to get the money for your mom. And I'm thinking, "ok it's Tuesday, I can't take off work this week, I can't drive down there, bring her, how am I going to do this?" And I've tried calling, it never works, no one ever answers. So, I go to see Janet for my scheduled appointment and I say, "I just feel so burdened and I feel kind of alone and abandoned and I need help and I don't know how to figure this out." And she said, "you know, God invites us to let Him bear our burdens." So, I'm in this place of pain and confusion and she says, "invite Him to bear your burdens, trust that there is a future, rest in the shelter of Her wings, rest there, trust, go about your day." I go to work, all my appointments end early. So, it's like 3 o'clock and I just felt like God said, "go ahead home, go ahead home and work on this, like try making a call" and I'm like, "no one ever answers, but it's 3 o'clock so, ok I'll go home." I go home, it's super weird because my son is home. Now, he's away at college, so he shouldn't be there, but he's there. And I'm like "oh, ok, that's nice he's there." I call, I'm on like, I'm listening to uh, I'm on hold for like an hour, finally someone, I get a machine, like an answering service and I leave this desperate message, I'm like, "someone please call me back, my mom is going to be homeless, I don't know what to do, I need someone to help me, you need to call me." And I'm like, I'm very upset. I hang up the phone, my son comes in, he's like, "are you ok?" I'm like, "nope definitely not!" And I felt, like the Lord said, "try again" and I'm like, "what the heck?! I just waited an hour, why would I try again? I've never gotten a person."

So, I call again and this time I waited half an hour and a person answers the phone. I don't even know, like, real people work there, because no one has ever answered the phone and this person is like, "yes I can help you, I just need to get permission from your mom, is she there?" Uh she's 5 hours away, which is why I called you, because I don't have her to bring her to you. But, my son is there and so, you know what he does, he calls my mom. So, I'm on phone with the case worker and he brings me his phone and I say, "yep she's right here." I feel like an idiot but ok, and "can we talk to your daughter about your case?" "Yeah sure, go right ahead." And we work it all out and my mom's benefits are like reinstated and she's good to go and we, like, were able to pay all these back payments and it just felt miraculous. I felt like a 1000 pounds had been lifted off my shoulders. Like it never works out like this, but the day I'm choosing to not freak out and to trust that I'm under God's wings, He sends me home early, my son is there, someone actually answers the phone, and it works!



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Does it always work out like that? No. But it did and I'm going to remember it. I'm going to remember that God worked in that way when I needed God to help me and I threw myself at his feet and said, "please I can't do this," mother bird showed up, swooped in and helped me in a way that I could not help myself. We can be honest with God about our pain. We can trust that there's a plan moving forward. When we read the Psalms, we're reminded of how raw and honest we can be with God. It's an invitation. We don't need to ignore Him, we don't need to not bring the problem to Him, we can bring the problem straight to Him. We don't have to pretend, we can be real and we can, like, look to the future with some hope that the way God has worked in the past, even if we can't remember for ourselves, we can look in here and say "how has God worked for thousands of years?" Be real and look forward.

So, I'm going to invite everyone, right now, to close their eyes and I'm going to ask for all of us, let's all invite God to be with us, to be with us right now, wherever we're at in our pain, in our celebration. Lord, be with us in our circumstances, be with us in our challenges, be real to us, be present with us. Lord help us to imagine being in the shelter of your wings. Help us to trust that you will work the way you have in the past, that you have a purpose for us, you have a future for us, that you're inviting us to be part of. Be with us, be with us, be present with us.

Right now what we're going to do is, we're going to do another, really this is a ceremony of remembrance, where we look back in the past of how Christ literally suffered through pain like us, for us. That's what this table is about. This is the table of suffering to remind us that the God that we go to can understand and has been there and suffered to the point of death on our behalf. So, this table is open to everyone, you're all welcome to come and partake. At the same time, no one has to feel pressure to come. But come through the center aisle from then people can return along the sides. So then come and share in the suffering of our Lord.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](http://ArtisanChurch.com).