In September of each of the past three years, Wesley has fielded a team for Operation Paintbrush. That annual community fix-it-up program enables low-income homeowners age 60 or over (or disabled of any age) to get the outside of their house painted. In fact, NeighborWorks is taking applications now for this fall's painting. If you think you might qualify, we have some of those application forms on the bulletin board by the fellowship hall. If you don't need or qualify to have your house painted, maybe you'd like to help us paint someone else's. When we get closer to September 7, we'll be recruiting team members who will do advance prep work and then paint the house on that one day. We'll also need some generous contributors to help pay for supplies. Last year, the Operation Paintbrush program rejuvenated 20 Pueblo houses. This year, they hope to bring fresh life to 25.

Because we have good painters and repairmen, our Wesley congregation has also reached out recently to help some of our own church folks with a few needs in their homes. A small group of Wesley guys made improvements at the Shaw Family's home last fall. Then just last week, two Wesley members painted a living room for a handicapped couple who have attended our church. This is a ministry that is very much appreciated. Especially when you're disabled and rather confined to your house, it's a wonderful thing to have an improved dwelling place.

I'm talking about home improvement today because I want to focus our attention on Psalm 91. We people of faith don't live only in houses made of wood and concrete. As the
Psalmist says, our refuge and fortress is our God. Because we abide in the shadow of the Almighty, let's spend some time this morning thinking about what "dwelling in God" means.

1. OUR HOME IS SECURE

Dwelling in God first of all means that our home is secure. Psalm 91:1 describes God as a fortress. God is like a sturdy stone castle. God will not fall over when the wind blows. God is tornado, hurricane, and even meteor proof.

I learned something this week. A piece of space rock is called an asteroid when it's really far away. When that same piece of space rock enters into the earth's atmosphere, its name changes to meteor. And when that same piece of space rock hits the earth, we then call it a meteorite. As the Russian people might be quick to tell you, God doesn't always protect us from being hit physically or hurt emotionally by something like that. But God's own being isn't diminished by these assaults. No matter what happens to us, God remains strong and reliable to offer us and others help and hope. As the hymn of Martin Luther was translated centuries ago, "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing."

Even if we individuals suffer and die, there is great spiritual peace in believing that God's divine nature is enduring. It's no secret that bad things happen to good people. Even the most faithful Christians experience unexplainable tragedy, stress, and pain. But there's great strength in believing that--in spite of what happens to us individually--there's a greater plan, a stronger purpose, and a more reliable order beyond us. We particular inhabitants will die, but our divine house will continue to stand and provide shelter for generations to come.

A reliable and secure house is important because so much else in our lives is fleeting. After the South African Olympic athlete Oscar Pistorius, nicknamed "The Bladerunner," was accused this week of killing his girlfriend, I heard a radio conversation about how we put people
like Pistorius and Lance Armstrong up on high pedestals and then feel crushed when they act like flawed human beings. No matter how amazing they seem to us in their abilities, we can't put our trust in sports heroes. Nor should we expect material things to keep us safe. The only thing we have that's really lasting and secure is dwelling in God.

2. OUR HOME IS A REFUGE & SHELTER

A second meaning of dwelling in God is that our home is a refuge and shelter. Not only is God trustworthy to be God no matter what happens, but God also helps protect us and keep us safe. Psalm 91 alternately refers to God as the wings of a mother bird or a warrior's shield that will fend off the terrors of the night and the arrows that fly by day. We know that God won't stop all bad things from happening. But, when we choose to dwell in God, we gain a buffering wall that helps us cope with whatever assaults and onslaughts life might send our way. Dwelling in God is like finding safe haven or sanctuary from those people and things which would pursue and harm us.

I guess that's why Christian people and churches have been some of the primary creators and supporters of places like battered women's shelters, homeless shelters, orphanages, soup kitchens, hospitals, and sanctuary programs for illegal immigrants. We believe that God is in the business of providing refuge and protection for the vulnerable and the weak, and that, as God's people, we should put ourselves to work providing this same kind of care.

Psalm 91:1 indicates that the refuge and shelter God provides not only protects us from the worst harm but also allows us to rest in the comfort of God's shadow. This reminds me of a giant church I visited while on a mission trip in Nicaragua in 2001. Our tour guide told us that the thick concrete walls of that building were a great evangelistic tool. Inside the sanctuary, the temperature was much cooler than outside. So, people would come into that church not only for
the spiritual words and rituals but also to get out of the extreme heat of the day. While worshiping God, the people felt relief not only for their souls, but also for their bodies. Dwelling in God offers more than protection. It offers us refreshment, a place where our energy can be restored and life can be enjoyed. When we dwell in God, we can let down our guard and have a good time. The refuge and shelter of God allows us to feel not only safe, but also comfortable.

3. OUR HOME IS A BASE FOR LIFE

But before you hunker down into the deep comforts of your refuge and shelter, I want you to realize that dwelling in God also means our home is a base for life. From this enduring and secure home base we are able to venture out. As much as we might like to, we can't hide behind a fortress wall day after day. Most of us eventually have to step out to go to school, earn a paycheck, or at least go to the store and bring home the bacon. And, while we're out there, we're faced with temptations and troubles. Sometimes those challenges are increased because of our own bad choices, and other times our stressors are multiplied by our faithful efforts to do God's work in the world. Whatever the cause, in verses 12 and 13, the Psalmist describes these challenges as lions, snakes, and stones.

You may not have noticed this when we first read Psalm 91, but this passage of scripture is familiar to us because of the gospel story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. After fasting forty days, Jesus was weak and vulnerable to temptation. That's when Satan came along and suggested that, if Jesus really were the Son of God, he should prove it by throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. Satan actually quoted Psalm 91:11-12, saying, "God will command angels . . . to guard you carefully; they will lift you up . . . so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." But Jesus responded with another scripture which says, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." (Deut. 6:16)
So, when we're out and about, living our lives and doing God's work, we shouldn't be intentionally endangering ourselves--just to test if God will protect us. Nor should we expect God to keep us from every kind of pain and trouble. Even Jesus experienced disappointment, betrayal, and death. The point of Psalm 91 isn't to say that we'll never suffer. The point of Psalm 91 is to realize that, wherever we are, God is there as a secure home base surrounding us with love and support, encouraging us to do what is right and good. Because of that, we don't have to stay inside our houses or only do ministry inside the walls of the church. By recognizing that God's grace-filled home is as big as an ecosystem or a cosmic environment, we will feel secure enough to venture out to live and do God's work in the world.

**CONCLUSION**

No doubt you heard about the cruise ship that was adrift in the Gulf of Mexico this past week. It suffered a fire, a power outage, and all kinds of awful consequences. Over 4000 cruise passengers and crew members were greatly relieved when their ship was finally towed into a port in Mobile, Alabama, on Thursday night. One passenger expressed that sentiment by making and holding up a sign that read, "Sweet Home Alabama." Whether we've had a miserable time or an ideal vacation, it usually feels pretty sweet to come back home.

That's definitely true when we're talking about God as our dwelling place. If you've been trying to live somewhere else, it's time to come home. Allow God to be your indestructible, meteor-proof house. Allow God to be your refuge and shelter that not only protects but also comforts. Allow God to be the secure home base from which and in which you venture out into the world to live your life and do God's work. In the *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy said, "There's no place like home," and that's especially true if we're talking about dwelling in God.