

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“A Prayer Overheard: Momma Bear Protection”

Rev. Mark Lampley

John 17: 13-19 and 2 Samuel 7:27-29

March 15, 2026

Our sermon series continues in John chapter 17. Chronologically, John describes Passion Week, during Jesus' last week of earthly life before dying on the cross to forgive us. John has just told us about the betrayal of the Last Supper. Up next was Peter's denial of even knowing Jesus.

We are on the eve of Jesus' unjust arrest and mock trial w/o due process. This is where Jesus prays his longest recorded prayer, one of unselfish, protective loving compassion- in the face of the evil one.

Structurally, Jesus' prayer is often divided into three parts: for his Father's will, **for intercession of his disciples**, and for all believers. Particularly in the middle of this prayer, Jesus prays for: our role, our function, our part in the world. As he wraps up *his* life's purpose, he prays for *our* life's purpose.

In John 17:13-19 Jesus speaks to our Heavenly Father: “But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you **to protect them from the evil one**. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. **Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth**. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.” At various times throughout life, we need protection. We spend a lot of time, energy, and money on protecting our: loved ones, kids, church, community, country, and world.

In preschool, we need people to protect us from monsters under the bed at night and the boogeyman throughout the day. In kindergarten we need “protection” from imaginary contagious threats to avoid- like cooties! Did you also run around trying to avoid them on the playground?

Throughout grade school, you had them, would soon get them, or warned others about them- to escape temporary social quarantine. In a similar unwanted tone, Karen's dad would teasingly say to Meg and Luke, “You have ancestors!” They would look straight into their grandfather's eyes insisting they did not have ancestors!

Then, in the elementary and middle school years, we need protection from: quicksand, hot lava, and more series dangers like creepy old men and other nefarious people we may hopefully never even meet.

In adulthood, we learn to guard our hearts from people who can break them. We regularly create stronger passwords against cyber thieves. (Annoying!) On the roadways, we have smart cars with lane change protection. In the woods, we warn others not to get between an extremely protective momma *bear and her cubs*. We watch over minors with: parental controls, digital boundaries, and 2- adult safety rules in scouting, sports, and places of worship.

In senior years, there are conversations about avoiding scams and using a cane/walker to safeguard from falls.

And no matter what your age, six years ago this week, you were concerned about protection against a mysterious foreign outbreak that came to be known as Covid-19. Sixteen days ago, we became anxious about Iran. A war which now has spread throughout the Middle East.

The Bible documents this need for protection, too. In the books of 1st & 2nd Samuel, God compassionately tends to his own.

God watches over a young shepherd boy, David, as he chases away and kills while protecting his father's sheep. God mercifully shielded King David when he had been shamefully sinful. In response, David prayerfully declares that God is trustworthy and promises good things to those He loves.

In one of David's Psalms- Ps. 121 Davis poses the question of protection. "I lift my eyes unto the hills, where does my help come from? It comes from the Lord, the Maker of Heaven and earth. He will not let your foot move. {Repeat} He, who watches over you, will not slumber." In my family, four generations have recited it whenever someone travels or enters a new season. You may have your own verse- perhaps Jer. 29:11- that celebrates God's provision.

And in the gospel of John, Jesus himself prays for his followers. He asks that even while we remain in the world, God will protect us from the evil one.

Do we need to do anything to activate or sustain our wellbeing? To be recipients of God's care and avoid trouble, do we need to hide away in a monastery or convent? Can we be both protected and exposed at the same time?

On the pulpit today, I have my olive wood carving from the Holy Land. It reminds me of Jesus' prayer as he makes his way to Gethsemane, which means oil press. To build on this concept of Jesus being pressed in on all sides, let me present a theological picture for how God protects us. I'd like to simply suggest some of the blessings we have through being God's beloved children.

First, we have God's blessing of reassurance of perpetual care.

Throughout Scripture, the Almighty God's watchful care is abundantly evident. As Psalm 91 protectively states, *"He will cover you with feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge."* It isn't contingent on our faithfulness, but on **His trustworthy nature**: There's no place you go— physically, emotionally, financially, or mentally— where God cannot protect you.

Psalm 139 soothes our anxieties: "If I go to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast" (Ps. 139:8-10). God reminds us of this reassuring blessing not only through Scripture, but also through the fellowship of His people. As the "communion of saints", we get to pray for one another, and in doing so it helps us experience God's goodness.

If you've had others intercede for you, then you know this peace. It can be powerful to have prayer one on one like our Deacons pray immediately following worship, or corporately when elders lay hands on during New Officer Installation.

Second, we have God's blessing of Christ's sacrificial holiness.

Particularly during Lent, we remember Jesus' saving work on the cross. * It can be summed up in one word: **"bear."** Isaiah reminds us: *"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...upon him was the chastisement that made us whole"* (Isaiah 53:4-5).

Holiness begins with Jesus. Because of His sacrifice, we are made pure. In response, we step into suffering with others- tragedy, sorrow, injustice- even for strangers. Think of the unknown families affected by recent violence of war. We may not understand why tragedy happens, but we intercede for grieving families of some 170ish Iranians, mostly civilian schoolgirls, along with 13 American service members. It's hard to know where God is in tragedies like war. Walter Brueggemann helps us muddle through, explaining, in prayer:

"We trust your hidden ways, [God]...give us eyes to notice what can be seen of you, give us faith to trust what stays hidden of you, give us nerve to obey you this day, even where we do not see."

Even when we can't comprehend how God is present in our world's messes, or how something good can come out of them, we maintain the God's truth. The truth of his death for our shortcomings. And as we hurt with others, we fade in the background... to accentuate and illuminate the holy cross- the way of reconciliation.

Third, we are blessed to pass it forward. Jesus prayed that His disciples— and we, His followers—would remain holy while in the world. This isn't about being good *on our own*; it's about continuing His work. God wants His love and holiness to flow *through us*.

The apostle Paul identifies us as Christ's "ambassadors." We engage the world and spread reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21). We do not retreat; we stay in the world, bringing: love, hope, protection, & healing. Our power doesn't come from avoiding the world. It comes from remaining *loyal to the One who has overcome it*.

Donald McKim echoes this, calling it "**bearing** mutual burdens: *"All people, regardless of race, color, or location...are ones whose burdens we can share...this is what has happened to each of us in Jesus Christ."*

We humbly enter the fellowship of suffering and the cross because we are called to *die* to self, so we can truly *live*. Jesus went before us; we follow. He tells us, *"I am the vine; you are the branches... Those who abide in me bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15).

We trust God's blessings and allow His life to flow through us, bearing burdens, interceding, and sanctifying the world around us.

As the body of His Church, where He is head, we get to: enjoy God's perpetual care, celebrate Jesus' holiness, and pass on the work of sanctification that He began. Let us show others the same kind of wonderful blessings we ourselves have received in Jesus Christ. Let us prayerfully protect ourselves and one another like a loyal momma bear by remaining in relationship with our Friend, who went to the cross for us.

I close with a prayer of protection from Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274)

"Give me, O Lord, a steadfast heart which no unworthy affection may drag downward. Give me an unconquered heart which no tribulation can wear out. Give me an upright heart which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside. Amen"

Charge & Benediction: What a privilege to be prayed for by the Son of God! God forth and do likewise, continuing the protection he began, in the name of the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit.