

REFUGE AND STRENGTH
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 • Newquist Interpretive Translation

To the Choir Director, a Psalm of David

I shelter in you, O God, as I shelter-in-place;
because you protect me, I trust you will never let me be disgraced;
because you are faithful to your covenant, I trust you will deliver me.

Come down to my level to hear me, I pray;
please rescue me quickly.

Be a Boulder of defense for me,
a House of Strength to heal me.

You are already my rock and my fortress;
for the sake of your own honor, Holy One,
I know you will lead me and guide me.

Pull me out of the net that has been laid in secret against me,
for you are my refuge.

Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you bring me back from the brink, Holy One, God of truth.

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My times are in your hand, O God;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and those who seek to persecute me.

Gaze upon me lovingly, as I seek to minister in your name;
heal me with your never-quitting-devotion.

“Most people have forgotten nowadays,” writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from a German military prison, “what a house can mean, though some of us have come to realize it as never before.”

“What a house can mean,” he goes on to say, “is a kingdom of its own in the midst of the world, a stronghold amid life’s storms and stresses, a refuge, even a sanctuary.”

Bonhoeffer himself is far from the sanctuary of his home, as he writes these words in 1943. The sting of homesickness is fresh. He has only recently been imprisoned for his resistance against the Nazi regime. What he does not know, as he writes these words, is that he will spend another two years in prison. And then be hanged for treason. Never to return to the sanctuary-that-is-his-home again.

We, of course, are becoming all too familiar with the home that is supposed to be our sanctuary in this season of global pandemic. For some of us this time at home is a joy. And indeed our first prayer should be one of gratitude for those of us who do in fact *have* a home in which to shelter.

For many of us, though, the home that used to be our refuge “amid life’s storms and stresses” has been invaded: by our jobs, as we work from home in all hours of the day or night; by the terror of unemployment, wishing we *could* work from home in all hours of the day or night; by our schooling, as parents with little training turn into teachers overnight.

As one of our community said in our Teach the Preacher conversation last Tuesday, “My home *was* my refuge. The world is now forced into my refuge.”

And we really have no idea how long it will last.

Bonhoeffer does not know how long his time will last, either, as he writes from a German military prison in 1943. Months of unknowing drag on, as he waits for release. Months turn into years, with no end in sight.

In the meantime, Bonhoeffer does what many of us are doing in the midst of our own unknown. He prays. He struggles. He writes. And he worships, gathering others who are imprisoned with him into a circle of support.

No longer able to seek refuge in their own homes – and certainly not in the sanctuaries of their churches – Bonhoeffer’s new congregation seeks refuge and strength in the only place we can ever be certain it will endure. They seek refuge and strength in the God who is our eternal home.

And they find it!

The psalmist, in our Scripture lesson today, finds himself on a similar spiritual journey. Attributed to David, this psalm begs God’s steadfast presence to do for the psalmist what his physical surroundings cannot.

I shelter in you, O God, the psalmist sings. Please rescue me quickly. You are my refuge.

Be my Boulder of defense, the psalmist almost demands of God. Be my House of Strength!

You can almost see the psalmist praying himself into a position of trust in the God whose steadfast love endures forever, shifting from trust to terror to an even deeper trust, as the song progresses.

“You are *already* my rock and my fortress,” the psalmist admits, as he sings, “and so I can rest in the reminder that “my times are in your hand.” That you will “heal me with your never-quitting devotion.”

“Into *your* hand,” O God, the psalmist concedes, “I commit my spirit.

The problem for us, at least the problem for me, is that I want to seek refuge in anything other than the steadfast love of God.

I want to seek refuge in the Interim Guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control, even if they have not been approved officially by the White House Task Force on the Coronavirus.

I want to seek refuge in the promise of a pension or a 401(k). Or the strength of the National Guard. Or the relief of a savings account.

I want to seek refuge in a face mask and six feet of social distancing from everyone except the man to whom I vowed “in sickness and in health.”

I want to seek refuge – God forgive me! – in the white supremacy that protects me from being shot and killed during my early afternoon run.

I want to seek refuge in my property and all the wealth I have built up to protect me from the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune, and I do not think I am the only one who wants to do that.

We who are human, it turns out, are desperate to seek refuge in almost anything other than God.

But the psalmist knows, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer knows, as we are all coming to know in this time of global pandemic, that even in our despair, even in our desire to find refuge in anything other than the One whose steadfast love endures forever, *God is still with us!* Ready to deliver us. Ready to pull us out of the net that has been laid in secret against us. Ready to pull us out of the net we have laid for ourselves and others, sometimes without even knowing it. Ready to “rescue [us] quickly.” Not from the coronavirus itself, I am afraid. But from the fear and pride and doubt and prejudice and power that leads us astray, even – and perhaps especially – *during* the coronavirus.

And the psalmist knows, as we are coming to know, that as God does rescue us and lead us and guide us, we can rest assured that our times truly are in God’s hand. That God is still gazing upon us lovingly, as we seek to minister in God’s name. That God is still healing us with her never-quitting devotion.

And as we shelter in God, as we shelter-in-place – no matter how long it takes – we will come to know in our bones, what we sing in our psalm:

There is no place like home, in the arms of our Mothering God.

Amen.