

Sermon: Not Being Shaken
Scripture: Psalm 71
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: February 3, 2018

It is a striking paradox, isn't it, that the Psalmist uses as a primary symbol for God, the invisible, intangible Spirit, the unseen, ethereal and incorporeal Divine, a rock, a most dense physical thing of the material world? "You O Lord are my rock of refuge!" How is it that the notion of God, that some people believe in and others do not, and proof either way is impossible to establish, a theological concept and idea can be experienced in the life of the Psalmist as absolute and solid as a rock and fortress? Do you know what he is talking about when he refers to God as his strong refuge? Has God been that for you in your life, your strength when all else fails?

The Protestant Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that the best time and the best way to read the Psalms if you really want to understand them and see the beauty and power of them, is not when you're in a place of calm and equilibrium in your life but rather when things are in upheaval and chaos, "on the edge of humanness", he says, "when life has gone beyond our frail efforts to control." Then we are most open to the Holy in the way that the Psalmist speaks of God.

So much of life is a process of being oriented, becoming disoriented, and then re-orienting again. Many of the Psalms arise out of that point in a life when we are most disoriented, when there is suddenly very little that seems a sure thing, when the usual routines

and places, relationships and materials that anchor our lives have ceased to hold and ground us enough, those times when we are no longer in control... then, interestingly enough, the theory of God, the abstract notion of the Divine, the immaterial reality of Deity, can be experienced as more real than anything else.

Is this a fantasy of the mind or a glimpse into the deeper truth of the matter? People come down in different places on that question. But what it feels like to the one undergoing the experience of God is this marvel and joy at what was an idea or a theory suddenly, and shockingly in some instances, becomes a lived real experience! And what happens is that the one who experiences it discovers a remarkable re-orientation where feet are planted on a deeper ground, weight placed on truer terrain, and roots spread into a more firm foundation. As the Psalmist says “from the depths of the earth, you, O God, will bring me up again, you will restore my life... and I will not be shaken.”

Many of you know that for the last few years in the season of Lent we have had a program we’ve called Tuesdays with Jesus where we’ve done Centering Prayer together and then listened to one of our community members speak about their work and their faith. This Lent, starting on the Tuesdays in March, we are going to do the same but this time listening to community members who have had particularly trying experiences in their lives and have turned to God, to their faith, to sustain them. We are calling it Jesus and Life’s Challenges – how people have found the rock and refuge of God in times of crisis, challenge, disorientation in their lives. If you have such a story and want to share please let me or Judy know and we’ll put you on the list.

Those moments of being saved from the disorientation can be a momentary religious experiences that comes out of nowhere as simply a gift from God or the experience of God as our rock and fortress can be due to a relationship with God that in the good times of equilibrium has been built and developed through prayer, worship, scriptural study, silence, praise. The Psalmist says “you have been my hope since my youth. I have ever praised you and become a sign to many, for you are my strong refuge.”

None of us are free of the disorienting times of stress, chaos and disorder, but in the times when our lives do know equilibrium and relative peace, when we are oriented and established on what feels like solid ground, we can work to develop the relationship with God, our connection to Jesus, such that when those crisis come and the crisis of disorientation hits, as it inevitably will, we can find our footing not on the shifting sand of our relationship with things and one another, as important as those are, but on the solid rock of our relationship with God.

This building of relationship can happen through weekly worship attendance where we practice attentiveness to God – together - so that for the rest of the week we remember who we are and whose we are and look for God in the face of the stranger or in the moments of sudden grace and blessing. We worship here not one hour a week but we worship here to make of our whole lives an attentive worshipping of the only One worthy to be praised and worshipped, God! We can build the relationship through daily prayer, devotion or silence. Centering into a quiet time within the silence of God can be a practice in letting go of our

thoughts and our plans, even if for just 20 minutes in a 24 hour period, so that when the inevitable moments come of having to let go or have the things ripped out from under us, we've gotten practice with it and experiential understanding of what it means for our rock, our safe shelter and refuge to be on the sure ground of God. And we can read and study our scripture to build that relationship so we get a steady diet of hearing how our forebears defer and refer to this rock-presence of God despite it all. Through such practices whatever upheavals of the external world then has less power to shake our internal world rooted now again on the foundation of God.

Jesus walked our road and experienced the upheaval and disorientation, the devastation we might say, of human living and through his prayer and forgiveness and love he took our hand to lead us to that new ground of God such that no amount of darkness and pain and chaos can separate us from the hand and heart that will root us in God. And for that we ought to give praise and thanks and continue to work to give over all our lives to God's grace, in Jesus name.