

Inspiration Rock

A sermon in the series “A Peace of Rock”

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- 1 Peter 2:4-7 Come to the Lord, the living stone rejected by people as worthless but chosen by God as valuable. (v. 4).
- Psalm 95:1-2 ¹O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! (NRSV)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God’s greatness warrants our attitudes and acts of worship.

Our church is located in a town that was named for a river that’s barely navigable. The river is rendered so by innumerable rocks – submerged and protruding – rocks that cause the river’s waters to twist and bend, and swirl and fall as the Rocky River drains parts of four counties into Lake Erie. The rocky walls that rise up at points along the riverbank probably contributed to the name “Rocky River.”

So, living as we do within the watershed of the Rocky River, we may not have rocks in our heads, but we have rocks in our genes. Yet I wonder how many of us have ever noticed that our scriptures often use the image of “rock” as a metaphor for God. During this year’s Homecoming worship series, that’s what we’re going to explore. Using the book of Psalms as our focal point, we’ll consider imagery of God as “rock”: why was “rock” such a favored image for God in ancient times, and where do we find God’s rock-solid presence in our lives today?

So let us come together by praying together. Repeat after me: *Let the words of my mouth / and the meditation of my heart / be acceptable to you, O Lord, / my rock and my redeemer. Amen.* [That, by the way, is the fourteenth verse of Psalm 19.]

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So... why rock? Why “rock” as a metaphor for God? After all, the psalmist could have considered any number of things as a metaphor for God’s character:

- “God is my ‘feather’....” Lovely, intricate, sometimes colorful... but not awe-inspiring.
- “O God, you are our ‘hummus’....” Nourishing, readily available... but hummus doesn’t exactly evoke a sense of protection.
- “God, you are my ‘rock’....” Now let’s see...
 - Rock is usually pretty hard. The ancients could make bricks that were rather sturdy, but they weren’t as hard as rock – rock was unsurpassed. That’s a good quality for God.
 - Rock was ubiquitous – it was everywhere. If you thought God was everywhere, too, describing God as being like rock reinforced that idea.
 - Rock could be pretty impressive. The photo on the front cover of the bulletin shows a typical example of rocky granite outcroppings in the middle of the Jordanian deserts. If you’re traveling mile upon mile seeing nothing but dusty, dirty red sand and then something like that looms ahead of you, that’s pretty awe-inspiring. God is awe-inspiring, too.
 - Rock could certainly have a protecting function. Elijah sought protection during a storm of wind and rain and fire, shielding himself within the cleft of a rock. David hid in rocky caves when King Saul had placed a price on his head. The body of Jesus was laid for what was anticipated to be eternal rest in a tomb hewn out of a rocky hill. Rock as protection... God as protection. Sure.
 - And of course, as Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount, if you wanted to establish something that would endure, you were infinitely better off building a foundation on rock than building on, say, sand. Rock as a foundation. Building on a rock-solid foundation. That’s a good image for what it is to have faith in God.

Now, “rock” is not a perfect metaphor to capture the nature of God. In telling a parable about a farmer and some seeds, Jesus pointed out that the seed that was planted in rocky soil didn’t fare well. It sprouted quickly but soon shriveled from lack of nourishment.

Nevertheless, in trying to convey God’s unequalled strength and constancy, God’s dependability and protection, God’s immeasurable awesomeness and power, the metaphor of God as a “rock” is pretty, well, rock-solid.

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Today’s verse from Psalm 95 illustrates a technique common in Hebrew poetry in which a statement is emphasized by being repeated in a slightly different way. In verse one we read, “O Come, let us *sing* to the *Lord*” (emphasis added), and that was followed by the same thought expressed in slightly different way: “let us make a *joyful noise* (sing) to the *rock of our salvation*” (emphasis added). The “rock of our salvation” is “the Lord.” God is our rock, our foundation upon which is built everything we are. Everything we have is built on God. Everything we know is built on God. Everything we believe... is built on the dependable foundation we have in God.

Of course, there are other powers in our midst. This world has many influential individuals. We live in one of many nations that exercise great power over the earth. But there is no thing or no one on which we would stake our lives who is comparable to God the Creator of the Earth and the Heavens. Money won’t save us. Political power won’t save us. Personal influence won’t save us. Not even our intelligence and cleverness and perseverance will save us. We are saved only by God, who is the foundation, the rock of our salvation – our “saving.”

...Which begs the question, “What exactly is ‘salvation,’ anyway?” Rather than quote from a theological dictionary, listen to how Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner tries to answer that simple but complicated question of “What is salvation?”:

Doing the work you’re best at doing and like to do best, hearing great music, having great fun, seeing something very beautiful, weeping at somebody else’s tragedy – all these experiences are related to the experience of salvation because in all of them two things happen: (1) you lose yourself, and (2) you find that you are more fully yourself than usual.

A closer analogy is the experience of love. When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. It is the one you love who is. You forget yourself. You deny yourself. You give of yourself so that by all the rules of arithmetical logic there should be less of yourself than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox there is more. You feel that at last you really *are* yourself.

The experience of salvation involves the same paradox. Jesus put it like this: “He who loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 10:39)

You give up your old self-seeking self for somebody you love and thereby become yourself at last....

You do not love God so that, tit for tat, [God] will then save you. To love God is to be saved....

It is a gift, not an achievement....

It is a process, not an event.¹

I agree with Buechner’s last comment: we are not “saved”; we are *being* saved. Our life-long process of growing in our love for God is what saves us from futility and meaninglessness. And God is the “rock of our salvation,” the bedrock, the rock-solid foundation we build our lives on. When we interact with the clerk in the store, the classmate in the hallway, the boss at work, the child at home, God in Jesus Christ calls us to lose ourselves by serving the other. When we lose our self-centeredness, we discover our lives are built upon a rock-solid foundation – the dependable, empowering love of God, our rock and our redeemer.

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¹ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC. New York: Harper & Row, 1973, 83-85