

# Between a Rock and a Hard Place

A sermon in the series “A ‘Peace’ of Rock”

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- Psalm 71 <sup>1</sup>In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. <sup>2</sup>In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. <sup>3</sup>Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.
- Matthew 27:57-60 Pilate gave orders for the body to be given to Joseph. <sup>59</sup>So Joseph took it, wrapped it in a new linen sheet, <sup>60</sup>and placed it in his own tomb, which he had just recently dug out of solid rock. Then he rolled a large stone across the entrance to the tomb and went away.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God offers a rock-steady sense of security amid the world’s tumult and threats.

On Wednesday morning I decided to squeeze in a quick walk with the dog before I headed off to a doctor’s appointment—just down the block and back... a short walk. As always, Parker the Dog was enthusiastic, and on this particular walk, we weren’t more than five houses down the street when he was also cooperative (in terms of “producing a product”). As I collected what his little behind had left behind I felt a few drops of rain on my neck. I heard a rush of wind approaching from the west as we turned and began walking swiftly back home, the sprinkle quickly becoming a steady drizzle... ten seconds later, a torrential downpour as we rushed past the last two driveways and ran into the house. Parker shook from head to tail and trotted away to rest from his exertion. Not me. I had to dash back into the torrent, running barely twenty feet from the house to our garage to drive to my doctor appointment. After that short drive I sought the refuge of an umbrella to get me from the car into the doctor’s office. But it was too late—my scalp, my glasses, my sport coat, my tie—everything was soaked. How I had needed a shelter from the stormy blast. How I had needed protection from the elements.

In the way that I was beat up by the sudden, unrelenting rainstorm, we can feel exposed to unrelenting forces that want to scramble our plans, forces that jeopardize our sense of peace and well-being, forces that erode trust in relationships. What are we to do? Run away? Hide? Fight back? Is there another option?

I’m calling this year’s Homecoming worship series “A ‘Peace’ of Rock” because the biblical image of God as “rock” is so prevalent, especially in the book of Psalms. Last week we learned how the magnificence and unmatched qualities of rock parallel the magnificence and unmatched nature of God. Next week we’ll look at the power of rock. Today, though, we consider how God is like a refuge or fortress, providing us with a rock-steady sense of serenity and assurance amid the chaos of daily living.

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 Psalm 19:14.]

Psalm 71 that we read responsively a moment ago included this line: “In you, O Lord, I take refuge...” and then later, “Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 71:1a, 3 New Revised Standard Version

What do we think of when we talk about “taking refuge”?

- It won’t be too many more months before we seek shelter from flurries and blizzards.
- I’ve been at Rocky River Park and Oakwood Beach as a storm approached from the west and watched as boats came streaming back to the river to seek refuge from the winds and the waves.
- This past week we were seeking the refuge of air-conditioned homes and offices and movie theatres and stores and vehicles to spare ourselves from the uncomfortable and physically taxing heat and humidity.
- A stranded motorist welcomes the refuge of a bumpy tow truck ride.
- Last week when I met a new family at our preschool, the shy child sought the refuge of standing behind his mother, which he assumed provided him with instant and complete invisibility.
- You and I can’t imagine what it’s like for children and women and men in war zones like Syria and Afghanistan to try to seek refuge from flying bullets and descending bombs.

Then again, maybe we can begin to imagine that....

Fifteen years ago today many of us sought refuge from the unparalleled chaos that unfolded on a spectacular, crisp, blue-sky morning. Many were glued to their televisions because they couldn’t believe what they were seeing or hearing. Some rushed to gather their children from school like a hen gathers her chicks for protection. For all of us, our foundation of invulnerability and immunity to terrorism was shaken. And as we watched horrific scenes replayed again and again on the screen, psychology experts began encouraging us to turn off the television, to stop insulting our brains with the images of unspeakable violence and immeasurable tragedy. We sensed a need to seek refuge from the news and questions and speculation.

That afternoon the clergy in our community organized a prayer service for that night. We didn’t know just what we were going to do. We knew that not everyone was going to flock to an impromptu worship service on a Tuesday night. But we also sensed that some people needed a place of refuge so they wouldn’t be forced to bear the pain alone.

That night a church served as our gathering place, but the refuge was provided by God. We entrusted our unprecedented fears to God. We gave our unanswerable questions to God. In the refuge of God’s secure and unchanging presence we handed over our vulnerability, our worry, our compassion, our grief.

The psalmist didn’t live through “9/11,” of course, but we can imagine other threats and catastrophes that he might have faced:

- despite back-breaking labor, one season his crops just don’t produce, and parents don’t know how they’re going to feed their households;
- or his village just happens to be located at what serves as a crossroads for seemingly every army in the world, and once again the troops have helped themselves to his stores of dried fish and vegetables, and in the process also damaged his home, or fishing boat, or fields.
- or a freak storm inundated his village and destroyed his home and precious few worldly possessions;
- or disease as robbed him of one of his parents and one of his children.

In the face of overwhelming devastation or tragedy, where do you turn for protection, for shelter, for refuge from the forces that assail you? Where do you find a dependable, solid foundation in order to regain confidence for living? The psalmist proclaimed confidently, “Be to

me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you [O God] are my rock and my fortress.”<sup>2</sup>

We know the human spirit is resilient. People are determined. Hopeful. Optimistic. After tragedy or devastation, we can put life back on its proper footing... but first we need to gather our strength. We need to remember – or learn – that hard times do happen, but they’re not forever. And in the security of God’s generous love, in the refuge of God’s peaceful protection, we are able to find a place of safety, a place of healing, a place of hope, a place to start anew.

Kenneth Samuels is one of the writers for the United Church of Christ’s online daily devotional called “StillSpeaking”. A few weeks ago in an article he entitled “Refuge, not Retreat,” Rev. Samuels shared these examples of how God serves as a place to rest and be restored, not simply a place to hide from the troubles facing you.

Almost daily now, our sensitivities and sensibilities are being assaulted with cascading reports of gun violence and human massacre, here and abroad.

We should keep in mind that terrorism is not just designed to inflict bodily harm but psychological intimidation. It is designed to cause us to shrink in the face of fear and to retreat into enclaves of tribalism ("Us against them"), isolationism ("I've got mine, you get yours") and nationalism ("[We're already here, so] Let's build a wall [to keep others out]").

When the foundations are being destroyed, God offers us a refuge, not a retreat. It's a refuge that shelters us from despair and protects us with the faith that no matter how awful the human toll, God's truth still marches on.

How else can we explain why the Civil Rights workers of the 1960's marched into the jaws of vicious racism in the South singing "We Shall Overcome?"

How else can we explain why in the aftermath of the massacre in Orlando, thousands still gather in cities across America to celebrate Gay Pride?

How else can we explain why protesters and police marched together in Dallas to call attention to Black Lives Matter, and why protesters and police mourned the lives of the police who were assassinated and why protesters and police vowed together that those fallen officers did not die in vain?...<sup>3</sup>

Anticipating this worship series about “A ‘Peace’ of Rock,” Melissa Stickney told me about a friend of hers who teaches Sunday school and had recently told her class the story of young David bringing down the mighty Goliath with a stone and a sling. As part of the lesson the teacher gave each kindergartener a small rock that could easily fit into their pocket.

It happened that one boy was having a hard time adjusting to the new routine of going to school for kindergarten every day. He decided he would keep that little rock in his pocket to remind him that God provides power, strength, and security when people feel overwhelmed. The Sunday school teacher learned that several times that week, when the boy started feeling overwhelmed by his new kindergarten routine, he’d reach into his pocket, and just touching the rock would make him feel better because it reminded him that God was with him.<sup>4</sup>

The little boy found refuge in God through a rock in his pocket. We know by faith that amid the chaos of daily living, facing routine inconveniences or faced with extraordinary obstacles, God is our rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save us.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 71:3 New Revised Standard Version

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Samuels, “Refuge, Not Retreat” in StillSpeaking Daily Devotional, September 1, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Personal correspondence