

The Rock that is Higher than I

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

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- Psalm 61 ^{2b} Lead me to the rock that is higher than I; ³ for you are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy.
- 1 John 5:13-15, 20-21 ²¹ My children, keep yourselves safe from false gods!
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: It is reassuring to know we can entrust our lives to God who is infinitely greater than we are.

I’m calling this year’s Homecoming worship series “A ‘Peace’ of Rock” because we receive the gift of peace from the biblical image of God as “rock.” It’s a biblical image especially prevalent in the book of Psalms. Two weeks ago, we learned how the magnificence and unmatched qualities of rock parallel the magnificence and unmatched nature of God. Last week we considered 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. Today let’s consider the comfort and assurance we receive from entrusting our lives to God who is infinitely greater than us.

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.]

American geniuses of comedy Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks used to do a routine called “The 2,000 Year-Old Man” in which Reiner would interview the lively old gentleman. At one point, Reiner asks the 2,000 Year-Old Man,

Reiner: Did you always believe in the Lord?

Brooks: No. We had a guy in our village named Phil, and for a time we worshiped him.

Reiner: You worshiped a guy named Phil? Why?

Brooks: Because he was big, and mean, and he could break you in two with his bare hands!

Reiner: Did you have prayers?

Brooks: Yes, would you like to hear one? “O Phil, please don’t be mean, and hurt us, or break us in two with your bare hands.”

Reiner: So when did you start worshiping the Lord?

Brooks: Well, one day a big thunderstorm came up, and a lightning bolt hit Phil. We gathered around and saw that he was dead. Then we said to one another, “There’s somethin’ bigger than Phil!”¹

“...There’s somethin’ bigger than Phil!” That realization is the first step of faith — realizing that there’s some power bigger than you, bigger than the things that worry you, bigger than the greatest, most expansive and encompassing and powerful power your imagination can imagine. “There’s something bigger than Phil” is really saying, “There’s something bigger than

¹ Quoted by Rev. Tim Carpenter in *Sermon Illustrations* at Sermons.com

me.” That “something” is when we recognize that God is, that God is active in our world, in our day, that God is the spirit empowering our very lives.

And when we acknowledge God’s unmatched grandeur and generosity, God’s compassionate love and untiring forgiveness, we want that. We want that God in our lives. We want our lives to unfold within God’s expansive grace. In a poetic image, the psalmist expressed that desire to submit to the unparalleled greatness of God. The psalmist appealed, “Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.”²

“Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” That is a great prayer of confession – confessing that we are not the ultimate power in our sphere of existence. *“Lead me to the rock that is higher than I”* is an act of submission, letting go of our illusion that we possess all wisdom and power. Having let go of that illusion we submit ourselves to God’s infinite wisdom and power.

Confession, realization, submission... that should be it. We’ve handed the steering wheel over to God.

...Almost. You see, our egos can’t quite let go. We hesitate to surrender completely to God’s will for our lives. We have a few things we’re reluctant to give up. Here’s how it happens.

Starting a week ago... or for you may be it was two weeks ago... or three or four or more weeks ago... as soon as we last walked out of this room after worship we began to be seduced... seduced by idols. They’re probably not big ones. “Mini-idols.” “Mini-gods.” For each of us, our mini-gods are customized. Personalized. What we really want. What motivates us. What we give our time and energy to. If I want you to think about your personal idols, I need to be willing to share with you what some of mine are. My personal list of idols that I subconsciously try to serve includes:

- Wanting to be liked
- Wanting to help people feel content
- The size of my waist
- The size of the church
- Being viewed as successful

Those are some of the idols I find myself being seduced by.

Take a moment to notice the idols in your life – the things that may be “behind-the-scenes” or “below-your-radar” but exert a lot of control over you.... All week long, we serve those mini-gods. Subconsciously they receive our attention, our effort, and as a result, they distract us from aligning our thoughts and words and deeds with the plan that the true, living God has for us.

A Congregational preacher named Dr. Reuben Sheares used to remind people “why we come to church every Sunday. ‘All week long,’ he said, ‘we’re cajoled and seduced to worship all the little mini-gods of our lives. Sunday mornings... we come to remember the one true God.’”³

On Sunday mornings when we return to this place, our spirits are crying out like the words of the psalmist, “Lead me to the rock that is higher than I!” We come to rid ourselves of the idols that have attached themselves to us like barnacles. We come because we want to stop wasting our time and energy trying to serve those mini-gods. We come to turn them over to God. We want to rid ourselves of whatever might distract us from what the Lord requires of us, which the prophet Micah summarized as “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk

² Psalm 61:2b New Revised Standard Version

³ From “Idols: what are yours through the week? What’s on your list?” by Talitha Arnold, Senior Minister of the United Church of Santa Fe (UCC), Santa Fe, New Mexico, in “StillSpeaking” Daily Devotional of the United Church of Christ. (Date unknown.)

humbly with [our] God.”⁴ We come once again to regain our vision of Almighty God overseeing our lives from unassailable heights, from “a rock that is higher.”

I came across this story of a plumber who learned to place his trust in “the rock that is higher than he.” By learning to live entrusting his life to “the rock that is higher” and allowing the real, true living God to be in charge of his life, doing what he himself couldn’t do, the plumber was able to rid himself of the idols of anger and self-pity that could have eaten away at him and contaminated his family life. I don’t know who first told this story, but he or she wrote,

I hired a plumber to help me restore an old farmhouse, and he had a rough first day on the job: a flat tire made him lose an hour of work, his electric drill quit and at the end of the day his ancient [pick-up] truck refused to start.

While I drove him home, he sat in stony silence. On arriving, he invited me in to meet his family. As we walked toward the front door, he paused briefly at a small tree, touching the tips of the branches with both hands.

When opening the door he underwent an amazing transformation. His tanned face was wreathed in smiles and he hugged his two small children and gave his wife a kiss.

Afterward he walked me to my car. We passed the tree and my curiosity got the better of me. I asked him about what I had seen him do earlier.

“Oh, that’s my trouble tree,” he replied. “I know I can’t help having troubles on the job, but one thing’s for sure – those troubles don’t belong in the house with my wife and the children. So I just hang them up on the tree every night when I come home and ask God to take care of them. Then in the morning I pick them up again.”

“Funny thing is,” he smiled, “when I come out in the morning to pick ‘em up, there aren’t nearly as many as I remember hanging up the night before.”⁵

The plumber had learned to trust his life to God, “the rock that is higher.”

What worries and cares in our lives do we need to hand over to God, “the rock that is higher”? Entrusting our lives to God – striving to live by serving God’s will for the world – we find a peaceful assurance because we realize that God is infinitely greater than we are and absolutely capable of helping us with the things we struggle with. As we devote ourselves to serving the one, true, living God – the “rock that is higher” – we are better able to love and serve God with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.

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⁴ Micah 6:8 New Revised Standard Version

⁵ Source unknown.