

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
Proper 16 Year C  
August 21, 2016

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A year ago, almost exactly to the day, I found myself warily shuffling my feet, willing them to move inch by inch, along a narrow rock ledge, about 6 "wide and about 6' long, with the canyon floor very far down below, with my unsteady hands, and then with my forearms when I could manage it, grabbing, grasping this large rock before me, from which this rock ledge protruded. There were no natural handholds and so, at times, my fingers encircled a protruding outcrop of smaller rocks or settled within a crag between the rocks as I tried to steady my balance inching my way to the other side over this rather precarious traverse. I remember my major struggle being: "what to do with my bag?" It wasn't well suited for this type of hiking, which involved rock climbing. I know better now, but didn't then. It was a canvas messenger bag, slung over one shoulder. The dilemma I faced as I crossed these 6' of terror, was that if I slung the bag on my back, then, I wondered, wouldn't my center of gravity be off and couldn't it be that it may pull me off the ledge, into the great abyss below? But then, of course, if I placed the bag in front of me, that meant there was more distance between me and the rock, which I clearly understood was the rock of my salvation. I knew that, from that moment, I would always have a more literal and deeper understanding of the image and metaphor of God as our rock and refuge, a mighty fortress to keep me safe. Although it sounds very dramatic now, I knew in that moment that my very life depended upon my ability to become "one with the rock," to rely entirely upon its stability, strength, and solidness, to get me through this difficult traverse.

We can imagine King David, believed to be the author of this psalm, as an older man, pacing in his chamber, with worry lines creasing his face, hands wringing with sweat, and perhaps making himself believe that God will again be his protector; that again in this time of trial, when he awaits news of whether his murderous son will succeed in the revolt against him, God, due to God's righteousness not his own, will show up and be a place of refuge for himself and God's nation of Israel. David has hit a wall again: a moment of decision that can be wracked with fear, and he has a choice to make: trust in God as his rock and refuge or crumble within.

I once sat with a woman who hit the same wall, a wall of fear and despair, but in a very different circumstance. She had come to dread the evening hours, when fits of anger would fill the living room as a cancer rapidly grows within the body, taking over the healthy and whole parts, absorbing the light, until only dark remains. She often felt she was walking on eggshells, afraid to speak, afraid to act, afraid to hope. She didn't know what would trigger the violence each particular evening, which made her always ready for it, although she never got used to it. But then she'd hit the wall. She realized by the look in his eyes, she wasn't the only one to

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sustain injuries that evening, and her dearest one ran and hid behind her legs. How could she be someone's rock and refuge when she herself needed one. Was she to crumble in a puddle on the floor or was she to turn to her rock and refuge, her protector, the God she wasn't even sure she believed in.

This wall is familiar to most of us: a place of being when we feel consumed with anger, fear, trepidation, or despair. We have a choice to make: we can crumble inside or we can cling to that wall, become "one with the wall," hold on tight with all our might, and then, with God's grace, realize it's actually God we're holding onto: God, our rock and refuge.

This image of God as our rock and refuge is prevalent in our psalm today. The psalmist implores God to be his strong rock, a castle to keep him safe, affirming that God is his crag and stronghold. I understand what that means after my scary traverse in the canyon last year. I understand the importance of finding a crag to hold onto, I understand the protection offered to me by that sturdy rock. I understand how much I wanted the rock I was hanging onto to be permanent, not permeable, to be solid and un-moveable. This is the God I also want and need, especially in times of trial.

One of the gifts of scripture is that we can settle into and explore the images of God which are presented, so we can know more of the character of God or the character of God's actions and enter more deeply into the mystery of God. The more we know about God, the more we know God, the more we can see God's presence and action in our lives, and the more we can respond faithfully to that divine presence. It's a strong image presented of God today. You may have been singing in your head, as you heard this passage, A Mighty Fortress is our God. The words Luther wrote may be rattling around within your heart "... a bulwark never failing. Our helper he, amid the flood, of mortal ills prevailing."

There are plenty of times when we need God to protect us. Times when we want a spiritual and physical barrier between us and the forces of evil surrounding us. Times when we want to know that there is a force greater than we that is protecting, guarding, guiding, and loving us. There are times we need this and times we are this. When I visit with Bella, one of our 4-year-old parishioners, she of course thinks I live at the church and so she asks me, when I'm leaving her home, "Are you going back to the castle?". That's what she calls our building, our church: a castle, which is perfectly reasonable when you see the bell tower from outside. There are times when the church needs to be a castle as God is our castle, with a moat of protection around it, with a sanctuary within it where peace and quiet can be found, where stillness can be experienced, where the busyness of our lives can be dropped at the doorstep, and where we can approach the altar for a time of solace and restoration.

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Our psalm invites us to look to God as our refuge and protector and trust that God indeed will be so. We, as the psalmist did, can call out to God, implore God to show up, and then sing God's praises in confidence that this will be so. I needed a strong rock that day to keep me safe. The psalmist needs to know he will be protected in his old age. The woman needs to know there is a shelter for her to live in, with locks and alarms to keep her safe.

However, it can be the very characteristic of a God as protector which can make us imagine God as apart from us, not a part of us, strong and unyielding, not soft and caring; with impenetrable walls which keep our enemies at bay, but also us.

Yet, one of the most amazing revelations of God I received during that day, was actually on the way back down, after having climbed, with assistance, up "the shoot", this narrow passage among protruding rocks, up to the top of Kitchen Mesa, and my experience points to the second image found in our psalm – God as a midwife, the one who brought the psalmist out of his mother's womb.

I think coming back down a rock strewn trail is actually scarier than going up. Maybe it's because your perspective places your sight to the bottom of the canyon floor, rather than up toward the sky. Maybe it's because you know the soil is packed hard due to the beating of the blazing sun and it can be difficult to catch one's footing if you slip at all. Or maybe it's because you're more tired and don't trust your body quite as much as you did in the coolness and freshness of the morning.

For whatever reason, as I approached the infamous ledge to traverse in the opposite direction, I nearly panicked. I prayed harder than I think I ever had before. I forced myself to breath, not just deeply, but at all. And then God showed up in a way which drew me into a deeper place of confidence and trust in God than would have been imaginable to me. One of my hiking companions was incredibly perceptive and attentive. As we approached the ledge, she kindly asked if she could carry my bag for me, and she asked me in a way that made it easy for me to say "Oh yes, please". One burden taken from me just like that. Then she showed me a kindness I will always remember. As I positioned myself on the ledge, breathed and prayed hard, she said, "Would you mind if I put my hand behind your waist, perhaps out about a foot?". She was brilliant, kind, and trustworthy, attributes which I believe are true of God as well. Had she asked if she could put her arm around my waist, I would have freaked out, imagining somehow she could pull me backwards into the abyss. But by placing her arm a foot behind me, the only distance I had to worry about was that foot, not the entire distance to the bottom of the canyon. She was thoughtful, kind, and able to breath me into a new place, a birth of confidence. Just like God the midwife would do.

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I learned a lot about dependence that day: about depending upon what is in front of you that is steady and solid and true, which is always God revealed. I also learned about depending upon what is gentle, careful, thoughtful, and which brings us into a new birth of any kind, which is also always God revealed. God seems to manage the combination of toughness and tenderness well.

The psalmist speaks of a necessary tension, yet also an innate connection between the reality of trouble, when we need the rock of our salvation and the trust we must have of God's faithful deliverance. At times we can feel consumed, of being completely in one of those realities, but I believe our psalm tells us that they cannot be disconnected. We cannot be in trouble without God there, being revealed in a multitude of ways, to protect and deliver us. And we cannot trust God's faithful deliverance if we never experienced trouble. I think the key is to find them together and offer praise to God that, although a life within God does include joys and sorrows, ups and downs, ease and dis-ease, God is with us, delivering us, tenderly caring for us, and birthing us into a new being. Amen.

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