

Psalm 62:1-12
Mark 1:14-20

Third Sunday After Epiphany
Midway Presbyterian Church
January 21, 2018

My Rock and My Salvation

Introduction to the Psalm

The Lectionary readings for this Third Sunday after Epiphany remind us that in the light of God there can come a fundamental shift, a reordering of our lives. But that depends on the reliability of God, to which our psalm attests. There's a recognition of the transient values of material goods. Listen to these words from Psalm 62:1-12...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson today presents us with an immediate call to the new reign of God. "The kingdom of God has come near." Repentance and faith will mark the entry to this kingdom. Jesus calls four fishermen to follow him. Listen to these words from Mark 1:14-20...

Sermon

The psalmist was in a difficult situation. Forsaken and now persecuted by former friends. He feels like a leaning wall, or a fence that is in danger of collapsing, as his foes seek his life. Outwardly they pose as friends but actually they are full of lies and hatred. These enemies plan to thrust him down from his eminence, from his elevated position, perhaps in a conspiracy of some high office among his people. Their weapons will be lying and duplicity. And they've worn him down, so much that he is about ready to give up. He needs a rock on which he can stand, a salvation on which he can count, a fortress from which he can defend and mount a counter attack. In short, he needs God. And for God alone he will wait in silence. And that quiet stillness will bring peace to his soul.

Thus does the psalmist bring before God the threatening situation he encounters, the harsh reality of foes who want to bring him down. Then this:

For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.
He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. (vv. 5-7)

According to Arthur Wiser in his commentary on *The Psalms*, by waiting in silence before the Lord the psalmist is lifted out of his threatening situation and the feeling of not knowing what to do in his anguish. Because God alone is his rock and his salvation, his fortress; therefore he will not waiver. Not only does he attain peace of mind but assurance of where to put his trust—not in power, or robbery, or riches, but in God and God’s faithfulness.. Furthermore he acquires sound judgment so that he is enabled to become the leader of other members of the community. One who can encourage the people to pour out their hearts before the God who will be their refuge also.

Of course, such assurance can sound like wishful thinking to people who feel victims of forces beyond their control. But the psalmist is not one who is unable to deal with the realities of the life we know. In the face of enemies he felt like a leaning wall and a tottering fence.

At one time or another have we not all had that kind of experience? Overwhelmed by forces beyond our control. The loss of a loved one, an illness the doctors had no answer for, the loss of a job and the steady income it provided, a depression that seemed to never lift, a storm that destroyed so much of what we had worked so hard for.

Former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Greenville, Allen McSween, says that at the heart of the psalm is a call to place our trust in (using the words of The Scots Confession, in our *Book of Confessions*):

...one God alone, to whom we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom only we must worship, and in whom alone we put our trust. (p. 11)

Though unseen, God is more real and more reliable than what we can experience with our senses. The psalmist calls us to trust in this unseen God of the universe. Such counsel may seem strange in a secular society which calls us to trust in the seen, things like money, political leaders, knowledge, education, technology.

The 1999 movie *The Matrix* provides an analogy for discerning the real versus the unreal. In the film, reality was a lie. A computer-driven conspiracy was created to deceive people into trusting their sensory perceptions, while hiding the truth from them. But Psalm 62 teaches us that what we perceive to be real and worthy of our trust is not as certain as the truth of the unseen God.

And the psalm assures us that the person who trusts in God will receive a blessing of inner peace and strength. We gain confidence that whether we face plenty or want, whether we face good times or bad, whether we face life or death, that God is real and trustworthy. The scripture bears witness that no matter how far we fall, always, underneath us, are the everlasting arms of God. That nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God that we know in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This all may sound a bit ethereal. But trust is an essential ingredient in life. An environment of trust is necessary for mental, emotional, and spiritual development to occur. Jürgen (YOU den) Moltmann once said. “Fish need water in which to swim, birds need air in which to fly, and we human beings need trust to develop our humanity.”

We affirm that God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. One of those mysterious ways was revealed in the story of Jan, a young mother in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania.

She told her remarkable story in a note to her pastor:

It was the end. I knew it. I could no longer fight. I sat here emotionless. I was totally alone. Others had tried to help -- doctors, nurses, parents, husband, children. But they were gone. Hours earlier I had come into the hospital on an emergency basis. I had back pain so severe that at times, it dropped me to my knees. This was not my first hospital stay. I had been sick for a long time it seemed...

I sat in the bathroom. It was the middle of the night. No people, no "miracle" medicine, no strength left. I was too tired to fight. I sat there -- four walls surrounding me. And a bleak, monotonous "bleep" from my battery-operated IV filled the silence. I couldn't stop the sound of that miserable machine, anymore than I could control my own miserable life. So I sat there -- dull, miserable, in pain, with no hope.

[Then I heard] something else. I didn't hear it with my ears -- but I did in my spirit. I heard someone crying. And I immediately knew that it was Jesus crying for me. I was shocked -- totally surprised. I didn't think he would do that for me.

This experience did not leave me emotionally elated. Nor did I feel a physical touch. Life was the same, except I now knew I really was not in this battle alone. Jesus cared in a way my wildest imagination would never have hoped for or expected.

Slowly I got up and shuffled back to bed, my IV still "bleeping" in my ears. Life was the same but different entirely... When there was absolutely no one else that would help me, he cried for me...

(Lee Eclov, *Where the Battle Is Fought*. From a sermon by C. Philip Green, "The Way to Glory," 8/13/2011)

This trust in God that we're talking about can be seen in the life of Abraham and Sarah, who at the call of God, left their homeland, their familiar surroundings, and wandered as strangers in a foreign land. Professor of Homiletics, Dave Bland says that this trust caused Abraham and Sarah to take risks, but it also gave them confidence in taking risks. Thus were

they able to step out from the comfortable, the familiar, the safe, and become open to an unknown future.

In our Gospel Lesson when Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, James and John, it will take trust for them to leave their work of fishing, their familiar livelihood, to follow Jesus and engage in the work of fishing for people. Just as it takes trust for us to answer the call of Jesus to serve him in some special way today.

Then using the image of balance scales with two pans suspended from a crossbar, the psalmist declares that we are all being weighed, judged by God—rich and poor, powerful and weak alike. And actually the “heavyweights” of the world, the rich and famous—have no weight. They think more highly of themselves than they ought. They are deluded. Their end of the balance scale goes up, not down. But the same is true for those of low regard, the poor and defenseless, the weak and vulnerable. They also have no weight. Neither rich nor poor are able to secure their own lives. They are both “lighter than a breath.” (v.9)

Nothing we can have and hold, nothing we can gain legally or illegally, no securities in our portfolios, can provide the ultimate security that comes from the God of steadfast love and faithfulness. As Jesus taught: “Be on guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” (Lk. 12:15) And he told them this parable:

“The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” (Lk. 12:16-21)

In the final verse of our psalm we are told that the God of power and steadfast love will “repay to all according to their work.” Thus those who seek to live in accord with God’s word can expect a reward. Not that we get what we deserve. But that the way to peace, hope, and joy is to orient one’s life toward the God who answered the psalmist while he prayed in silence.

The psalmist found the Lord to be his rock and his salvation. His source of confidence. His stability. His solid foundation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke about the importance of building your life on the sure, solid, bedrock foundation of God and His Word. A house—or a life—built on a foundation of sand will not withstand the tests, trials, challenges, and storms that every one of us encounters in life. What is needed is for us to build our lives on the rock of God’s Word, his promises and his character. And what the psalmist found as he waited in silence, we also can find today. He can be the fortress in your life and mine. Even in the midst of a dark valley, even the valley of the shadow of death. In silence wait for God alone and ask the Lord to help you to know him as your rock and your salvation. Then trust him to lead you through the dark valley, as only he can do.

Let us close with this prayer by the Dutch Catholic priest and writer, Henri Nouwen:

[Dear God,]
 Speak gently in my silence.
 When the loud outer noises of my surroundings
 and the loud inner noises of my fears
 keep pulling me away from you,
 help me to trust that you are still there
 even when I am unable to hear you.
 Give me ears to listen to your small, soft voice saying:
 “Come to me, you who are overburdened,
 and I will give you rest....
 for I am gentle and humble of heart.”
 Let that loving voice be my guide.
Amen.

And Amen.