

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Psalm 71:1-6

*In you, Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame.
In your righteousness, rescue me and deliver me;
turn your ear to me and save me.
Be my rock of refuge,
to which I can always go;
give the command to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.
Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of those who are evil and cruel.
For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord,
my confidence since my youth.
From birth I have relied on you;
you brought me forth from my mother's womb.
I will ever praise you.
I have become a sign to many;
you are my strong refuge.
My mouth is filled with your praise,
declaring your splendor all day long.*

There's an old story about a chaplain in the German army during World War II. (Hitler's armies did include chaplains, but they had no rank. They were similar to Red Cross workers, embedded in military units but not part of them. Not all of them were sympathetic to Nazi ideology.)

In 1944, this particular chaplain, a Lutheran minister, was billeted in a private home in Budapest. The home belonged to two Jewish physicians, father and son, who so far had managed to avoid being sent to a concentration camp.

They were grave, dignified men. They had no choice about providing the room to the German chaplain—the occupying authorities had commanded it.

The Nazis discouraged contact between hosts and guests. Even so, the two Jewish doctors knocked on the chaplain's door one day. They asked him if he needed anything. He asked for a small chest for storage, and they said they could provide it.

The older one of the pair suddenly blurted out: "Pastor, you will protect us, won't you?"

The chaplain stammered something about being a relief worker: they had nothing to fear from him. But that seemed so inadequate. What could he say that would reassure them?

Suddenly he was moved to say: "Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai echad."
("Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is one.")

The two were overwhelmed. Their relief was palpable. In gratitude, they silently pressed the chaplain's hand and left.

It was such a little thing for the chaplain to do. Those were mere words, after all. Yet, what powerful words they are! To a person of no faith, they are mere empty syllables. Yet to a believer who knows the One who is a rock and a fortress, they say all that needs to be said.

David, the writer of Psalm 71, knew God as a solid rock and a refuge that he could always turn to in times of trouble. He testifies to us through what he wrote in Psalm 71 and other

psalms too, that there is no shame in asking for help from God. God wants us to ask for his help because he loves and cares for us, and God wants to help us.

It is believed that David was an older man when he wrote this psalm. He was looking back on his life and remembering that he belonged to God from the moment he was born—the moment when God breathed life into him, and he will always belong to God.

He looked at his past and could point to moments when he knew God was with him. Maybe he did not feel it while he was in the heat of the moment, but after some time of reflection the evidence was undeniable that God has always been with him. Later as he looked into the future, he did not know what was yet to come, but he believed that God would be with him just as he had been in the past.

David asks God again for help in this psalm. We are not sure why. We only know that he asked for help to be freed from the grip of the wicked, from the grasp of evil and cruel men. Maybe as an old man aware that death would certainly come, he was afraid of death.

He knew the wicked would be alive and well in his future as it had always been in his past. Yet David said, "I run for dear life to God; I'll never live to regret it." In other words, he was not going to hesitate to ask God for help, even when the wickedness all around felt suffocatingly close and threatened him.

David was not going to rely on himself to get through the adversities to come. He knew his life depended on God. God was his refuge. The personal pronoun, "You," at the beginning of verse 5, focuses attention emphatically on God—"You keep me going when times are tough." This is a clear message that the psalmist's confidence was not in himself, but his confidence was in God because he knew he could trust God. God had proven himself to be faithful—not that God should need to prove himself.

An unknown author made this analogy: "Can you imagine the captain of a ship, driven about by rough winds and desiring to drop anchor, trying to find a suitable place to do so right on board his own vessel? Such a thing seems ridiculous, but for the sake of a lesson let's picture the skipper doing that. He hangs the anchor at the bow, but still the boat drives before the wind. He sets it on the deck, but this too fails to hold it steady. At last, he puts it down into the hold, but has no better success.

"You see, an anchor resting on the storm-driven craft will never do the job. Only as it is thrown into the deep can it be effective against the wind and tide. In the same way, the person whose confidence is in himself will never experience true peace and safety. His actions are as futile as one who keeps the anchor aboard his own ship. Cast your faith into the great depths of God's eternal love and power. Place your trust in the infinitely faithful One."

This is excellent advice! Remember, if your hope of riding out the storms of life is anchored on your own capabilities, your confidence has been tragically misplaced. Instead, with the psalmist, declare, "In You, O Lord, I put my trust" (Ps. 71:1).

More proof that the psalmist trusted God is his use of imperatives. In verse 3, he boldly said, "**Be** my rock of refuge!" Later in verse 3, he prayed, "**Give** the command!" and then in verse 4, he said, "**Deliver** me!" Are we prepared to face our adversaries, even death, with unwavering confidence and trust that God is with us and helping us with the difficult journeys in our lives.

Jesus knew what it was like to face adversity. There were people who threatened to stone him and who verbally abused him almost everywhere he went, even his hometown of Nazareth. And he knew the worst was yet to come he knew that he would face deep humiliation and death even though he did nothing wrong. Even so, Jesus trusted God and God's will.

Therefore, Jesus knew that persons who follow him and who strive for the kingdom of God will face adversity. But through his life and death on the cross, Jesus trusted; and he taught, ultimately by example, and challenged believers to also trust that God's providence is sufficient.

The psalmist was also committed to teaching this truth to others. In verse 7, he said that he had become like a "portent" to many, meaning he became something like a prophet who warned them through his own personal experiences, that everyone will fall on hard times, yet they can trust in God. But even more telling is what he said in verse 8, "My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long." These words reveal to us that the hope and trust that David found in God pervaded his whole being with heartfelt praises to God.

When we hold tightly to our faith even amid times of adversity, we find God with us, and we have reason to praise God, day, and night. Praise is not the celebration of the powerful and the prosperous, rather, it is the language and the lifestyle of those who know at all times and in every circumstance that their lives belong to God and that their futures depend on God. If our lives reflect the praises we lift to God, our lives show the world, that we know God is always with us and helps us get through our adversities. David's testimony of faith and trust in God, and God's faithfulness to him, inspires us to hope and trust in God when we need help.

However, if all we do is complain to others, we communicate to others that we do not trust God to help us. We may also end up communicating our disappointment on how God is helping us, offering them an unrealistic expectation of what God will do. God's help comes in many forms. Too often with those unfamiliar with God, there is the expectation that when we ask for healing or help and we do not get it exactly the way we expect, people conclude either there is no God, God doesn't care or they may even feel God is punishing them for something. We don't want to communicate this kind of misinformation. If we feel we need to complain about our dissatisfaction with God's handling of our misfortune, we should take it to God with an attitude of openness, and seeking understanding and wisdom from God.

The Psalmist's passionate message is clear, God is with us in the midst of the mire and muck of our lives. He assures us that there is no shame in asking for God's help. He encourages us to trust God and God will come through because we are precious to God and he loves us. There is no greater evidence of how deeply God loves us and wants to help us than that of the gift of his only Son, Jesus.

It is Jesus who is the cornerstone of our faith. He is the rock of our salvation. He has proven that we can trust him too. He will run to our rescue. Jesus is our Holy teacher. He shows us God and teaches us how we can trust and put our hope in God. We read about times when even Jesus spent time with God and asked God for help. Jesus is our perfect example of faithfulness to God even as he faced many fearful challenges, including the horror of death. We can be assured, likewise, that we can call on God for help and we can trust God.

The most well-known hymn of the Lutheran tradition, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," was written by Martin Luther. Luther was not a popular man during his lifetime, because he challenged the status quo of the church. Those who fight error and corruption within a system are seldom popular. Luther knew death threats, the outside influence of affliction, and the personal agony of losing his own children, yet by the grace of God he was able to keep the faith and keep pointing others to Jesus and the truth of the written Word that has been given to us.

God is our refuge, our fortress, our safe place. Nothing or no one else is a true refuge. Amen.