

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

June 26, 2022

Psalm 46 (CEB)

Isaiah 44:1-8 (CEB)

Faithful One, we come listening for a word of hope, longing to feel your presence. Speak to us through psalms and prophets that we may know your truth, find comfort, and build fortitude to follow you faithfully in our lives. Amen.

We continue with our mini-sermon series on different metaphors and names for God found in scripture. As Pastor Mary mentioned last week, this idea came up several months ago as we were engaged in a discussion about inclusive language for God. It is something we in the Presbyterian Church has been thinking about for decades. The Book of Worship, which is part of the Book of Order that helps us order our ministry and worship as Presbyterians, states, “The church is committed to using language in such a way that all members of the community of faith may recognize themselves to be included, addressed, and equally cherished before God.” (W -1.2006b) It is helpful, then to examine the words we use – and to recognize the rich diversity of names and metaphors we have in scripture.

And we recognize that no one image will suffice because no one image will fully capture the magnitude that is God. But we make attempts with our limited language to capture a glimpse of who God is, or an aspect of God. In our imagery and metaphor, we can build a bridge from the sacred and holy to the human and ordinary. And we know it will be incomplete and that some images will resonate more than others for us as individuals.

American Franciscan priest and writer, and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, Richard Rohr writes, “All language about God is necessarily symbolic and figurative... The Bible uses metaphors for God, such as rock and shepherd. Jesus describes himself metaphorically as the bread of life and the light of the world. The Spirit is portrayed as breath and wind. God is not literally a rock or an actual shepherd on a hillside somewhere, yet we need these images to “imagine” the unsayable Mystery.”ⁱ

Last week, Pastor Mary talked about God as potter. This week we look at a number of images, all centered around the idea of protection or strength. Throughout scripture, and in the Older Testament in particular, God is named as rock, fortress, shield, and refuge.

Our first reading come from the book of Isaiah, at a time when the people of Israel were in exile; an uncertain time where they felt powerless. God provides a vision of a better future and words of assurance.

ISAIAH 44

But now hear this, Jacob my servant, and Israel, whom I have chosen. The LORD your maker, who formed you in the womb and will help you, says: Don't fear, my servant Jacob, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen. I will pour out water upon thirsty ground and streams upon dry land. I will pour out my spirit upon your descendants and my blessing upon your offspring. They will spring up from among the reeds like willows by flowing streams.

This one will say, “I am the LORD’s,” and that one will be named after Jacob. Another will write on his hand, “The LORD’s” and will take the name Israel. The LORD, Israel’s king and redeemer, the LORD of heavenly forces, says: I am the first, and I am the last, and besides me there are no gods.

Who is like me? Let them speak up, explain it, and lay it out for me. Who announced long ago what is to be? Let them tell us what is to come. Don’t tremble; have no fear! Didn’t I proclaim it? Didn’t I inform you long ago? You are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no other rock; I know of none.

Our second reading comes from the song book of the bible, from the book of Psalms.

PSALM 46

God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That’s why we won’t be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea, when its waters roar and rage, when the mountains shake because of its surging waves.

There is a river whose streams gladden God’s city, the holiest dwelling of the Most High. God is in that city. It will never crumble. God will help it when morning dawns. Nations roar; kingdoms crumble. God utters his voice; the earth melts. The LORD of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety.

Come, see the LORD’s deeds, what devastation God has imposed on the earth—bringing wars to an end in every corner of the world, breaking the bow and shattering the spear, burning chariots with fire.

“That’s enough! Now know that I am God! I am exalted among all nations; I am exalted throughout the world!” The LORD of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety.

Many years ago, I was on a mission trip in Guatemala. The church I was serving, Fox Valley Presbyterian Church, had partnered with Living Waters for the World, and we worked with organizations in Guatemala to help install water purification systems. Eventually Fox Valley formed a strong partnership and relationship with a church in Guatemala. The church was pastored by a married co-pastor couple, Freddy and Isabel. They were a force of nature. A system had been installed at their church and had a significant impact on their community. When we arrived for a follow-up trip, Pastor Freddy had supercharged the system we had helped install and it was producing hundreds of gallons of clean water every day, far beyond the capacity the original design could handle. On this particular visit, Pastor Freddy had lined up a couple of visits to other possible locations for water systems. So, one afternoon, the four people that were part of the team from Fox Valley, including myself, Pastor Freddy, Pastor Isabel, and their son all climbed into the church van to head off to look at these potential sites.

The first stop wasn’t very far, a school that had a well, but no clean water. We climbed into the van for the next stop, believe it or not, the town’s government health department, which had running water, but which was not clean. Freddy told us he had one more location he wanted us to check out, but that it was a little further away. We all climbed into the van again, and he said because it would take a while, probably over an hour, so we might want to nap in the van on the way as he drove. All of us from Fox Valley climbed into the back bench seats, along with Freddy and Isabel’s son, while Pastor Freddy drove, and Pastor Isabel sat in the front passenger seat. About 30 minutes into the trip, I heard Pastor Isabel mumbling quietly, she wasn’t talking to any of us in the

back, and she wasn't talking to Pastor Freddy. I saw that her son noticed too, and when I looked at him, he just gave me a broad smile. Pastor Isabel kept up the quietly mumbling for the rest of the trip until we made it to our destination.

When we got out of the van, I mentioned to her son that I could hear his mom talking, but that I didn't understand what she was saying. He causally said, "Oh, she was just praying." Curious, I asked what she was praying about. He smiled again, and then said, "She was praying for our protection and safety. We just rode through a really bad area, and she wanted to make sure nothing happened to you all." While I appreciated the prayers, and I did, it also made me a little scared for the ride back!

We all want to feel safe. We want to feel secure and protected. And we want to rely on God. I love the image of God as rock, as unmovable, as a defense against the evils of the world. And, at the same time, I recognize that I struggle with these images of God's protection, or God as a fortress or a shield. Because I know bad things still happen. I appreciated Pastor Isabel's prayers, and yet, I was still afraid to get back in that van. I was certainly more alert on the ride home.

A few things help me when I think about these images of protection and the fact that, sometimes, bad things happen. The first, is that I remind myself of the context that the Israelites found themselves in, they were a people without a home, without power, often without a lot of hope. These are people for whom life was precarious. Of course, they talked about images of God as a fortress or a shield. These are images of defense against harm. They are not images of weapons that do harm.

The people of Israel needed reassurance that God was with them in the face of trouble. Psalm 46 starts by saying, "God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble

into the center of the sea, when its waters roar and rage, when the mountains shake because of its surging waves.” These are not some ancient words that have no relevance today. The world is at times, both literally and metaphorically, falling apart. Earthquakes and flooding are happening now. Literally. Metaphorically, the last few years have been earth-shattering.

None of the scriptures that talk about God as rock, or fortress, or shield, or refuge tell us that those images mean that bad stuff won’t happen. Rather, it says that when the bad things do happen, God is there with us. God’s care, mercy, and love are unfailing. God is with us in the troubles. The Psalms give a full expression of the human condition, both the good and the bad. “The Psalms offer both a way of naming the times when we are in the pit and the times when we are set free to hope.”ⁱⁱ Psalm 46 reassures us that God is forever present and is our place of safety, amidst the dark and the light.

A second thing I find helpful to remind myself of is that most times, when God is talking, God is addressing the community not just me as an individual. The comforting words of Psalm 46 start with “God is our refuge and strength...” Not “my refuge and strength,” but, “our refuge and strength.” I take comfort knowing that in those times where I might be struggling, that the strength God provides is a communal strength, is to the Body of Christ. We are not meant to go it alone. We are designed and made for community. When I may not be able to carry a particular burden, someone else in the community will be. When I may be at a low moment, someone can come alongside me and help me along. When I may have a small amount of faith, I can count on someone to come along to share theirs with me. Remember the images of the shields interconnected? One shield alone wouldn’t be enough to face the slings and arrows of all the world can throw at you, but when you have other shields, when they are interlocked together, they form something bigger

than any one shield on its own. They create something stronger to withstand the onslaught.

Finally, whenever I get in my head, and I struggle with reconciling these images of God as protector with the knowledge that bad things sometimes happen, I remind myself that some of this is unexplainable. That there are aspects of our faith, or aspects of God, that we simply can't or won't understand, although we may experience them. I think of the phrase from scripture that talks about the "peace that surpasses all understanding." In the book of Philippians, Paul tells the church he is writing, to not be anxious, but, "instead, in every situation with prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

And I know, trust me I know, that the last thing someone who is worrying or who is anxious likely wants to hear is someone telling them not to be anxious, but I have experienced in my life a peace that surpasses understanding. And it's generally when, even in the midst of stress, of crisis, I remember that I am held in God's hand. That I am enveloped by an abiding presence. Yes, it takes the shape of the faith community that surrounds me, but it is greater than that even. More unexplainable than that. It is a deep peace knowing that nothing can separate me from God's love. It doesn't mean hard things won't happen. But it does mean that whatever that hard thing is, God is my rock, my fortress, my shield, my refuge. That God is present in my time of trouble.

The last three and a half months for my family have been hard at times. As most of you know, Kelly suffered a stroke unexpectedly and had emergency brain surgery to remove a blood clot from her brain in mid-March. She has done remarkably well with her recovery, and we

continue to see improvements. The surgery itself was significant, and the first few days afterward, while she was in ICU were critical. There was a lot that was unknown. And even in the midst of all of it, I was calm. I was at peace. I cannot explain it, which is awfully hard for a preacher to admit. But I knew ultimately that no matter what happened, God was there.

The same was true 14 years ago, when she had another emergency brain surgery, for a totally unrelated issue. At the time, we had been married for about eight years and we had a three-year-old child and a seven-month-old baby, Hera and Olivia. There were a lot of unknowns, a lot of bad possible outcomes, some really scary words that one should never look up online, and again, there was gratitude and peace that made no sense. Yes, we had the love and support of our faith community, friends, and family, and I will never take that for granted, but there was something bigger as well. There was God. A steady presence, a refuge in times of trouble. A deep knowing that nothing would separate me from the love of God. Not one thing.

Friends, may we all know this deep and abiding presence of God. When the slings and arrows of life come at you, when the waters rage and the earth beneath you quakes, may you remember the shelter of God. May we know the protection of the mighty fortress that is our God. May we rest on the foundation of our rock and redeemer. May we all experience the peace that surpasses all understanding.

Amen.

ⁱ Richard Rohr – cannot find the original source, but referenced by Roger Wolsey in <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogerwolsey/2017/12/11-ps-progressive-christianity/>

ⁱⁱ Mary C. Earle, *Days of Grace: Meditations and Practices for Living with Illness*, p. 7.