

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

¹ *In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.*

² *Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.*

*Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.*

³ *You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,*

⁴ *take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.*

⁵ *Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.*

¹⁵

*My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.*

¹⁶

*Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.*

Often immediately after the birth of a child, providing all went well with the delivery and mother and child are okay, a newborn is placed in the mother's arms where her hands gently hold the baby close, providing the newborn who has emerged into a new environment with a sense of security and love. Giving birth is hard work for the mother, and the newborn's journey into the world is traumatic. Most mothers feel excited to finally meet the little one they long awaited, and the helpless newborn is comforted by the safety he or she finds as mother holds him or her close.

When life throws us a curve, leaving us with a host of feelings like helplessness, hopelessness, and fear, we may wonder where we can go to find security and guidance. As children, we likely ran tearfully to a parent or guardian we trusted for help. The words of the Psalm that we read this morning reminds us that we can turn to God when things feel like they are falling apart for us.

Psalm 31, along with Psalms 22 and 69, is among the longest and most impressive of the genre known as laments, complaints, protests, and/or prayers for help. At first, it may sound to us like this would be a rather depressing Psalm, but it is not. It actually is a prayer of hope and assurance. Let's take a closer look at Psalm 31 to unlock how this is a message of hope.

The psalm opens recognizing first the importance of the One he is speaking to—God. The first words are not, O woe is me; instead, he acknowledges the greatness, the power, the wisdom of God, and because of that he knows he can turn to God with his plea. I'll say more about this relationship with God in a few moments, but this recognition of God's supreme authority and power is where the prayer is made real.

Then the writer makes his plea to this mighty God. The person is obviously feeling threatened by his enemies, even to the point of fearing for his life. The psalmist is straight-

forward, candidly honest, about the danger threatening him. The threat feels so great that it compels the writer to turn to God, and his prayer for God's help is prayed boldly and with great confidence.

Within his plea to God are specifically chosen nouns like refuge, rock, and fortress, which paint a picture for us of his desperate need for a safe place where he can hide. These words indicate he is feeling vulnerable, exposed and without any protection.

The verbs he uses in addition to "incline"—deliver, rescue, and save—express the writer's feelings of an extreme need and dependence on God. He is telling God that he cannot face the current situation he finds himself in without God's help. The use of these nouns and verbs more than once in the psalmist's prayer is a bold proclamation that he needs God and God's help, with no strings attached.

We all are dependent on God. Dependence on God is the attitude which says in all things "I need God." But there is something in our human nature which wants to "go our own way" and to "make it on our own." We want to fix things ourselves. Our pride wants us to be able to say something like, "I figured it out, I worked hard, I am a self-made person, and LOOK AT ME!" We want to have some control over our lives, so we can hold onto some things we think are necessary to make us happy.

But, unless we are willing to put ourselves in God's hands—meaning, unless our cries for help from God include our recognition of our total dependence on God and our requests come with no strings attached, our requests for help are not sincere, and we are left spinning our wheels and wondering why God doesn't help us.

I came across this thought-provoking piece. The author is unknown, but it illustrates how a conversation with God might go if we are not willing to admit our need for God. Listen...

Me: Hey God.

God: Hello.....

Me: I'm falling apart. Can you put me back together?

God: I would rather not.

Me: Why?

God: Because you aren't a puzzle.

Me: What about all of the pieces of my life that are falling down onto the ground?

God: Let them stay there for a while. They fell off for a reason. Take some time and decide if you need any of those pieces back.

Me: You don't understand! I'm breaking down!

God: No - you don't understand. You are breaking through. What you are feeling are just growing pains. You are shedding the things and the people in your life that are holding you back. You aren't falling apart. You are falling into place. Relax. Take some deep breaths and allow those things you don't need any more to fall off of you. Quit holding onto the pieces that don't fit you anymore. Let them fall off. Let them go.

Me: Once I start doing that, what will be left of me?

God: Only the very best pieces of you.

Me: I'm scared of changing.

God: I keep telling you - YOU AREN'T CHANGING!! YOU ARE BECOMING!

Me: Becoming who?

God: Becoming who I created you to be! A person of light and love and charity and hope and courage and joy and mercy and grace and compassion. I made you for more than the shallow pieces you have decided to adorn yourself with that you cling to with such greed

and fear. Let those things fall off of you. I love you! Don't change! ... Become! Become! Become who I made you to be. I'm going to keep telling you this until you remember it.

Me: There goes another piece.

God: Yep. Let it be.

Me: So, I'm not broken?

God: Of course Not! - but you are breaking like the dawn. It's a new day. Become!!!

Think about it, how is God supposed to help us if we tie his hands with our pride, fears, and desires? Oh sure, God can do anything. He could just take over and fix everything whether we like the way He does it or not, but that's not how our relationship with God works.

There's this whole thing called free-will that God gave us. We get to decide whether we really want God in our lives. It's what makes our relationship with God genuine and not a game of manipulation. We get to decide whether we really want God's help when life gets hard. The psalmist's plea for help confronts us to consider whether our pleas for God's help are sincere. Are we willing to really put ourselves in God's hands and do what God requires of us to move to a better place in life.

A generously overweight man stepped onto the scales, turned to his friend, and exclaimed, "I don't believe it! I began this diet yesterday, but the scales say I'm heavier. Here, Norm, hold my jacket. Oh no! it still says I'm heavier. Here Norm, hold my twinkies. If this is any indication that this man is sincere about wanting to lose weight, he's clearly going to fail.

Confronting us even more then, the psalmist boldly says in verse 5, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." He willingly gives his whole self over to God because he trusts what God will do. Do these words sound familiar? They should for every Christian. Jesus prayed the same words to his Father above as he was dying on the cross. It may be hard to imagine praying those words as he suffered, and his body was being torn to shreds. One might think he wanted nothing more than to get down from that cross. But Jesus knew and trusted his Father, he trusted that his death on the cross was not the end for him, and he put himself into God's hands.

We read in Acts 7:59 that the martyr Stephen uttered the same words as he was being stoned to death for his faithfulness to Christ's mission. He utterly trusted God's care for him. He relinquished his jeopardized life over to God, over to God's safekeeping. He knew he could not save himself, but he knew he could entrust his spirit to God, and that was all he needed to know.

When we move down to verses 15 and 16, then the psalmist expands his focus beyond his current predicament to "his times." He recognizes that persons—including himself—and communities face many different seasons and circumstances, both difficult and amazing. That is, every passing moment, day and year bring newness and inconsistency and risk. The psalmist with his trust and confidence in God considers all these variations in his life yet to come and willingly hands them over to God. He is at peace doing this because he has no doubt that God has only good things in mind for him. No matter what comes his way, he has no doubt that God will be with him to help him to work for good in his life. Are we ready to join the psalmist with this same confidence? Like a trusting newborn babe, are we willing to put our lives into the hands of God?

The Flying Roudellas, who were trapeze artists, said there is a special relationship between flyer and catcher on the trapeze. The flyer is the one who lets go, and the catcher is the one who catches.

As the flyer swings high above the crowd on the trapeze, the moment comes when he must let go. He arcs out into the air. His job is to remain as still as possible and wait for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck him from the air.

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The flyer must never try to catch the catcher but must wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him, but he must wait. Likewise, it is for us, when we make our plea for help from God, we need to trust and wait for God, our mighty fortress. He will be there. Amen.