

Finding Strength in Our Refuge

Jeremiah 1, Psalm 71

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A few years ago, Amy, Laura and I went to Bremen Ohio to visit friends who had moved away from Brighton a few years earlier. Stacy and Nelson would invited us to the Erb Family Christmas in Bremen every year which was then held over a long weekend in January. We had become like family so going to the Erb Family Christmas had become a tradition. We had only a few days together, but we didn't dare miss the gathering. On the second night there I, Amy and Stacy and the other outlaws of the siblings, as we were called, had our traditional dinner at a local restaurant. Laura and the others had gone back to the air BNB we rented in the neighboring town. As we sat down I noticed the high winds and big flakes of snow blowing down the street. I checked the forecast again for the third time in an hour, a snow front was coming in but maybe it wouldn't get too bad, I thought. When you only have two days to see chosen family, you don't really want to cut your time short because of a little snow. Soon after we had ordered drinks we got a text from Laura saying, "hey the drive back to the house was really bad. You may want to head back soon."

After discussing it some more with the others, we agreed to skip dinner and just eat the appetizers that had just come. When we got back to the car it was decided that I should drive, being the experienced Minnesotan of the group. They put their trust in me and my many years of winter driving, even if I was a bit out of practice living in Brighton. We headed out and as soon as we turned onto the highway we could see it was already much worse than Laura had said. It was now white out conditions with drifting snow blowing across the road. Stacy pulled out her phone and we used GPS to confirm where the road was and since there was no oncoming traffic I drove down the center of the highway. I was white knuckled praying for God to protect us and get us

the 10 miles down the road safely. I had to rely on several guides to keep us on the road. The occasional yellow line, my proximity to the electrical poles adjacent to the highway and Stacy's GPS showing me where the road was virtually. Each mile down the road I wondered if we were better off turning back. Amy kept reassuring me that I was doing great and how much she trusted in my driving skills. With each deep drift I hit I said, "these are the worst conditions I have ever had." The snow was blinding, gusting violently across the open fields making it hard to stay center. Under my breath I prayed, "Dear God keep us moving forward and on the road, please." Fortunately for us, it was a very straight and flat road to the town where we were staying. It wasn't until we turned into the long driveway did we hit a final drift that was too deep to push through and my Honda Civic was stuck just fifty feet from its parking spot. The teens in the house ran out to free us from the drift and we settled in for a cozy night with the immediate family together. We joyfully prayed a prayer of thanksgiving for God sheltering us from the harsh weather as we drove home that night and again the next day as we drove back to Illinois.

The words of the Psalmist today reminds me of the prayers I said that night. Asking God to guide us, shelter us from the worst of the storm and most of all return us and others home safe. While Amy and Stacy put most of their trust in my ability to drive in a blizzard, I solely put my trust in God alone. Sure I had some skills but driving on unfamiliar roads in the dark of night, blinded by the whiteout was very scary. I knew it was by God's providence that we didn't get blown into a ditch or stuck in one of the hundreds of drifts forming on the road.

Life sometimes feels like a dark road stretching out into the unknown. We strain to see where the guideposts are. We sense the dangers that life can bring our way. Reading or even praying a psalm like Psalm 71 reminds us that we are not alone in this struggle. We are reminded to trust in God alone to shelter us from the harsh storms of life. We gain faith and hope from hearing the prayers of others who, like us, put their trust in God.

The Psalmist recounts the many ways God has protected, guided and delivered them from many dangers and enemies in the past. It is helpful to remember and to name the past difficult times God has delivered you. Such memories deepen our faith that God will once again be there in our time of need. Doubt and fear can quickly overwhelm our faith if we don't actively hold onto the testimonies of the past.

In this psalm we get the clear impression that the psalmist is a much older person, perhaps King David near the end of his life, perhaps. We hear this when they say, "Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you." This writer is showing us that recounting such stories help propel us through life and overcome the drifts of doubt that build up around us. But it is not just recalling our own experiences but naming the source, the origin of this faith. Both the Psalmist and Jeremiah name their birth as the origin of their faith, remembering that it was God who initiated and gave birth to their faith to begin with. It reminds me of the words from Hebrews 12, another powerful passage about the faith of our ancestors and God as the author and perfecter of our faith.

Hebrews 12:1-2 says this "Therefore, since we also have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let's rid ourselves of every obstacle and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let's run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking only at Jesus, the author and perfecter of the faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Jeremiah was recounting his first encounter and call of God in his youth. A memory that strengthened him to face the harsh and painful work as a prophet to the nations. Sometimes recalling our first encounter or our calling in Christ gives us the courage to face the difficult times ahead, especially when our mission is to call out the injustice and sins of an entire nation like Jeremiah was.

Jeremiah 1:9–10, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” If you have ever read the writings of Jeremiah you know he suffered a lot for speaking out against the sins of Israel including imprisonment, beatings and starvation. It took great courage for him to speak truth to power both in the temple and in the courts of kings. But the truth, when it exposes the sins of the past, is never comfortable to hear, especially when it’s leveled at you and your abuse of power.

The psalmist names God as a fortress, a refuge but that does not mean that the writer never faced the battle. The writer’s faith in God became a source of added protection like a fortress or a place of respite in the heat of battle like a refuge.

These battles are continuing still today. We are watching the world struggle with many dangers, toils and snares. Covid is exposing many greedy and selfish hearts and the failures of our society to care for one another equitably and adequately. We see the rising threat of systemic racism, fascism, and tyranny and the complicity of others wanting to ignore it, hoping it will just magically go away.

So whether you are old and praying for God to once again strengthen your resolve and be your fortress from which to battle the terrors of today. Or you are young and laying claim to God’s call for you to be a poet, a prophet to the nations once again. Let us build up our courage and faith to pray “In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.”

God responds, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you. I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Let us keep praying as we push through the drifts of fear and doubt. Let us proclaim with courage and faith, the righteousness of God in the face of sin and evil that confronts us.