

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:6-14
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

The night before the Inauguration just this last Wednesday, the President Elect and the Vice President Elect held a ceremony at the reflecting pool between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. On either side of the reflecting pool were 56 spotlights pointed toward the sky representing the states and territories of the United States. On the edges of the reflecting pool were 400 rectangular shaped lanterns...each one representing 1000 people who had died from the coronavirus since the pandemic began in January of last year...almost exactly one year ago. That's 400,000 fellow Americans dead in one year's time...more Americans lost to this disease than were lost in the entire timespan of World War II. Throughout this past year, we heard about the tally of deaths almost on a daily basis. We could watch the numbers climb, but not once during that year were we ever invited to pause together for a moment...as a nation...to express our sadness and horror and even our fear about what had happened to our neighbors and fellow countrymen. There was no national acknowledgement of our pain and grief. There was no avenue for naming it or even allowing ourselves to feel it. We have all been mourning, but it's been a private and solitary mourning. The night before the Inauguration we were given an opportunity to grieve together. There were very few words spoken, but they were enough to unleash the avalanche of tears that flowed from so many of us as we began to realize how much we were hurting. In a very real sense, we were together...grieving together...mourning together and suddenly aware of our own pain and fear. A soloist sang Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah"...one of the most powerful laments ever written. And another soloist sang "Amazing Grace" which is a hymn that so many of us associate with bereavement. You could almost see and feel and hear the collective tears of Americans all over the country...perhaps all over the world...as we were invited to share our mourning for our fellow citizens with one another. It was a cathartic moment. It was a touchstone to reality. There has been a lot of conversation about that one moment ever since. It made a huge impact on so many of us as we realized that we had been harboring all this grief alone for at least a year. That's a heavy burden to carry. It was a relief to be able to release some of it. And that was the purpose of that simple, elegant, powerful national service that we shared on Tuesday night. The service did what it was intended to do even though it never mentioned God or any other deity considered to be a higher power.

Most of us are acquainted with funeral services and graveside services which provide an avenue for expressing our grief in the company of others, but very rarely do we have a chance to voice

our sadness to God in the form of a lament. Culturally, we have lost the art of lament...and that's a big loss because it is an avenue for release of emotion...of sadness and grief. Many of us may know that lament is one of the types of psalms in the Bible, but we may not realize how infrequently we share a lament within our congregations, in Bible Study, or even on our own. It's important to know the value of the lament. If you've ever spent time reading the Book of Psalms in the Bible, you know that the psalms are human beings' conversations with God. They are the hymns of the Hebrew people in ancient Israel. At one time, they were set to music and sung by congregations in the Temple in corporate worship as well as being used in private worship. That's why sometimes we sing them. They express every aspect of human emotion from thanksgiving, to praise, to petition, to lamentation, to the release of anger and disappointment. Every Sunday, in our weekly worship service, one of the pieces of scripture is always a psalm, but that part of the scripture readings rarely commands our attention. Generally, without any study or examination, we don't know the circumstances under which a particular psalm was written. We don't know if it was a psalm composed for corporate worship or used by the psalmist in solitary prayer. We usually don't know the context in which any particular psalm is written, so it's sometimes hard to discern the meaning. But they are our half of the conversation with God that invokes and provokes a response from God and gives us an opportunity to release our own emotions and offer them up to God.

The Psalm we heard this morning, Psalm 62, is for the person seeking asylum and refuge from adversaries and adversity. We've all been in that position at one time or another. The Lectionary leaves out several verses that explain why the psalmist is seeking refuge. Those omitted verses help us better understand this psalm as a whole. It seems that people the psalmist considered friends are spreading rumors about him...falsehoods that damage his reputation and injure other relationships. He's feeling cornered and betrayed and he's searching for solace and security and safety and stability. Who among us...at one time or another in our lives...has not sought out each one of these things for ourselves. Given the year that we have just lived through, we may *all* be seeking solace and security and safety and stability. While our reputations may not be at stake, our physical safety is on the line on a daily basis. Psalm 62 starts out as a personal account of the psalmist's relationship with God. God is the only one he waits for in silence. The emphasis is on 'only'...a description the psalmist uses seven times in this short psalm. He says only God is his rock and his salvation. The psalmist apparently already has a relationship with God. The sequence of possessive nouns is powerful: my rock, my salvation, my fortress, my mighty rock, my refuge. The psalmist is claiming God as his own and is building a verbal fortress of protection in God.

The most powerful point in this psalm is when the psalmist turns from personal protection from God to communal and corporate protection for everyone...for all of us. He cries, "God is a

refuge for us!" We are reminded of those most powerful words from St. Augustine...the first century theologian, philosopher and bishop of Hippo when he declared to God: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." And there probably isn't a single person listening to this sermon this morning who has not experienced those moments in life when exasperation laced with anxiety has prompted a call to some power greater than ourselves. That would be God. Every human being...believer or not...reaches out for something or someone when the chips are down and disaster is looming large. We instinctively know that we need a source of power beyond ourselves. The psalmist reaches for God and in doing so also focuses on those temptations we have to turn to other sources of solace: economic security or social status tend to lure us into thinking we are safe, but neither of those things provide safety for our souls. They are illusions and the psalmist tells us that on the scales of life they are lighter than breath or a puff of air. They are nothing. Economic security and social status are nothing! The psalmist warns us not to be tempted to extort or rob or to put our trust in wealth. A big bank account or a healthy 401K is not going to save any of us.

Putting our trust in God...knowing that God is the source of all safety for our souls...rests on the promise of God and we know that God keeps that promise. God has created us and loves us in a way far beyond anything that we can imagine. God is filled with love for us...and with mercy...and with kindness. There is a Hebrew word for this kind of love from God...this all encompassing love. The word is *Hesed*. This *hesed*...this loving kindness and mercy...shapes not only our relationship with God, but also our relationships with other human beings. God gives it to us and we give it to other human beings. None of us could claim God as our own without God's *hesed*. We could not confirm God as a rock or a fortress or a refuge without God's *hesed*. We are safe with God. The psalmist could not pressure others to give up their delusional and vain dependencies on other things without God's *hesed*. Nor could anyone advocate a reliance on God alone as a refuge and a hope and a salvation without God's *hesed*. It is this praise and thanksgiving for God's *hesed*...loving kindness and mercy...that gives this psalmist both confidence and a restful soul. And it is what gives us the courage to trust in God as our refuge. We know God to be steadfast and reliable. Once we give it over to God, God is in charge.

Each one of us at some point in our lives has had our back against the wall without a visible avenue of escape. We all know what that feels like. We all know that we survived those moments even if we didn't call on God. But most of us...if not all of us...look back on those times realizing full well that we did not save our own skins. Some power beyond us saved us. Some quirky series of events over which we had no control rescued us. Some intervention that we could not have made on our own came to our rescue. We can call those experiences whatever we want. We can attribute those saving graces any way we choose. But at the end of

the day...regardless of how we name those elements of rescue in our own lives...we can attribute them to a loving force far beyond ourselves. The psalmist names it as God. And when we call on God in a psalm, we start a conversation with God. We provoke God to answer us. We look for God to respond to us. We draw God into the conversation. And that loving force...that hesed...is what gives credence to the promises of God. The roots of faith are based on knowing and experiencing and accurately naming the saving grace of God.

Thanks be to God...our rock and our refuge.

AMEN.