

June 20, 2003/Season after Pentecost
David L. Edwards

Taking Refuge

Psalm 46 *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help
in trouble. Therefore we will not fear....*

1 Kings 19:1-15 *At that place [Elijah] came to a cave, and
spent the night there.*

For some time I have been interested in the biblical image of “taking refuge in God.” A good number of the psalms speak of this. In Psalm 43: “Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me! For you are the God in whom I take refuge.” In Psalm 46, which we just read and sang, there is the declaration: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear....”

Elijah takes refuge in God. He runs for his life from Jezebel, the wife of king Ahab. She wants to kill him because he wiped out the prophets of the Canaanite god Baal. Elijah has gotten himself in hot water because of his faithfulness to God’s call, which will frequently happen if we live by God’s call in our lives and not what everyone else wants us to do. So Elijah high-tails it into the desert. He is dejected, sits under a broom tree and just wants to die. He falls asleep, an angel wakes him up, tells him to rise and eat. A bread cake and a jar of water appear. Elijah eats and drinks and falls asleep again. This happens a second time.

Elijah was exhausted. The conflict with the false prophets and the people of Israel themselves who didn’t like what he was saying. The pressures of living by God’s call in a hostile environment. The way everything seems to be suddenly falling apart. His flight into the desert turns into a much-needed retreat. God takes care of him, providing him with rest and nourishment. This is a reminder to those of us who push and push ourselves, even for the best of motives and purposes. Driving ourselves until we are depleted and exhausted is not an admirable spiritual quality. God may well call us to some very demanding work, but does not drive us to the point of self-destruction.

Elijah ends up in a cave on Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. It is the holiest of places, symbolic of Elijah’s taking refuge in the God who called him in the first place. But there in the cave, Elijah hears a voice questioning him: “Elijah, what are you doing here?” Well, Elijah pours out his complaint: I have been zealous for God, and even your own people have turned against you, and I have to deal with that. I’m the only faithful one left, and now my life is in danger.” Elijah is playing that game, “Ain’t it awful.” Like us at times, he has become so full of frustration, disappointment, and discouragement that he is complaining about anything and everything. Things can get pretty messed up at times. There is surely plenty wrong with the world. But Elijah has fallen into blaming and complaining, ready to throw in the towel. God has another answer for him, however.

Elijah is called forth from the cave to witness a display of God’s powerful presence in and lordship over all creation. Times of retreat, of taking refuge in God restore our perspective. We need to glimpse once again God’s lordship over life. We need to get back in touch with the wide and deep expanse of God’s care and control that are beyond our small view of things. When I was a senior in college, I hit a wall. My life was suddenly filled with major events and decisions. I felt detached from my studies, each paper and test feeling taking a monumental effort. Kaye and I were going to be married, and I was wondering if I was really ready for that commitment. The military draft was grinding away, stoking the Vietnam War with young lives like mine. I was struggling with what I was going to do out of my faith in Christ. That fall things came unraveled. One evening I called the college chaplain, who came over to see me. He sat with me, patiently listening as I poured out my fears and frustrations and confusions. After a while, I felt myself calming down and feeling more peaceful, more ready to face my life and what lay ahead. As we walked out of my apartment, the sun was setting behind the mountains in beautiful serenity. My friend the chaplain said in a quietly reassuring way: “David, after all there are still beautiful sunsets.” I was reminded of the great envelope of life, of that Power and Presence that undergirds and holds securely all of life beyond the smallness of my own life.

After the display of God’s power there on Mount Horeb, everything dies down to what the New Revised Standard Version

calls a “sound of sheer silence.” In other translations it is a “still small voice.” Out of that silence comes God’s voice questioning Elijah again: “Elijah, what are you doing here?” And again Elijah repeats his complaint, which by now sounds like whining: “God, I’ve been zealous for you. Your people are forsaking you and not listening to me. I’m the only faithful person left, and my life is in danger.” How does God respond this time? He gives Elijah new instructions. He is to go back down the mountain, back to his work and appoint a new set of leaders in Israel. In other words, he is to resume the life to which God has called him.

Elijah needed to take flight. He needed to escape the murdering anger of Jezebel. He needed to withdraw from the scene for a while. He needed rest and physical nourishment. He needed a time of withdrawal in order to ground his life afresh in God and God’s call in his life. This is what it means to take refuge in God. Not an escape from reality but a withdrawal in order to re-root our lives in God, to regain perspective and purpose.

Taking refuge sounds like abandoning the world and its needs. It sounds like giving up our responsibilities toward the world. It sounds like retreating into an illusory existence, far away from the realities of life. In fact, however, the kind of taking refuge the scriptures talk about is not a flight from reality but a movement into what is most real. It is our lives in the world that get out of focus, that become frantic and angry and without direction. We become filled with resentments, disappointments, expectations, and hostilities. Things get out of perspective. We lose our life-giving connection with God. We become hopeless and things look depressing and futile. We fall into complaining.

Taking refuge in God is important spiritual work. We take refuge when we make that commitment to spending time every day in silence, meditation, and prayer. The inward journey is our taking refuge in God, working daily with grounding our lives in God and God’s call. We take refuge in Christ, who says to us, “Come to me, all of you who are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Christ meets us daily with the grace of God’s love for us and calls us to follow him within the uniqueness of our lives and gifts. We take refuge in the community of faith, the community of prayer and service. We need to be the kind of community in which persons can take

refuge, in which all can find acceptance and affirmation, in which all can see themselves as gifted and called persons, in which all can make and strengthen that connection between their own lives and God. This means that each of us needs to be working with our own inward journey so that we make room for others, so that others find in us an open welcome and a listening heart.

Yesterday at our silent retreat, I experienced anew what it means to take refuge in God, in Christ, and in the community of prayer and service. As we entered the morning’s silence, I began to realize how preoccupied my mind was with trying to figure out so many problems, trying to fix so many things, and fretting over so much I had come to see as wrong with others, the world, and myself. How to stop all of this? How to turn my complaining into joy and a sense of my own gifts, my own calling? I worked with the breathing and quieting that I had spoken about at the start of the retreat. I sat quietly and walked attentively, listening to the voices of the birds, the wind, the small stream that runs alongside the trail, and the silent voice of the sunlight. Little by little, my inner life settled down. I began to discern all the stuff I could do nothing about and let it go. My complaining and fretting began to turn to a sense of my own life and what I was called to be and to do. I had come to take refuge, from life, from the world, from a self that had become wound tight and filled with discouragement. I had come to face and pour out my complaining and self-pity. I had come, in the end, to take refuge in God who is more real than all the problems and preoccupations, and who is able to renew and refresh my spirit and get me focused back on what I am called to do with my life.

As we shared together at the close of the retreat, I realized that all of us had been taking refuge in God. Each in our own way had come seeking refuge in the God who could restore and renew us, and then send us forth as those who are called and empowered to bring life to the world.

We are persons and a community called to take refuge in God. It takes commitment to that inward journey of grounding our lives in God and to that outward journey of listening and responding to God’s call to be and to do what God gives us to be and to do. So taking refuge is not something we do just when things fall apart or get so bad we can’t take it. Taking refuge is the nature of our whole life’s journey.