

May 18, 2014 / Eastertide / David L. Edwards

## Taking Refuge

### Psalm 31:1-5

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

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

**1 Peter 2:2-10** ...*like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house....*

### John 14:1-14

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

*To seek refuge means to look for a place...that is safe, a place we can rely on.*

--Thich Nhat Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha's

### Teaching

The psalmist writes: "In you, O Lord, I seek refuge...be a rock of refuge for me." The psalms are full of taking refuge in our relationship with God. They speak of feeling threatened, overwhelmed, or fearful, and reaching out to God as a rock of refuge, something solid, offering shelter, recovery, and the renewal of hope and strength.

The meaning and practice of taking refuge, I have come to believe, is the heart of our lives as followers and a community of Jesus. I used to think taking refuge meant running away or hiding from things that needed to be faced. Christian faith can be used to avoid or deny things around us or within us that need our response. There can be, in any religious tradition, a preoccupation with individual salvation, and neglect of the importance of living fully here and now as part of the good creation. "Taking refuge" might sound like pulling the covers over our heads.

Soon after graduating from seminary, I began to take silent retreats at the Abbey of Gethsemani and later at the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse in Kentucky. I also discovered and began to study Zen Buddhism. I began to learn what taking refuge really means. There are "three jewels" of Buddhism: the Buddha—both the historical person Siddhartha Gautama and the living Buddha, much as we speak of the historical Jesus and the living Christ; the *dharma* or the way of truth, much as we speak of the Word of God or the Gospel; and the *sangha*, the

community that practices mindful living, just as our community practices the inward and outward dimensions of the life of faith. The Buddhist says, “I take refuge in the Buddha, the one who shows me the way in this life. I take refuge in the Dharma, the way of understanding and love. I take refuge in the Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness.” [The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching, Thich Nhat Hanh, p. 161] Taking refuge, then, is not to escape but to live in the truest, most meaningful way. We take refuge through simple spiritual practices that keep us grounded and growing in who we really are, how we are called to live, and the sacredness of our own and all of life.

In our community, we take refuge through what we call the “inward journey” of prayer, individually and together. Daily times of quietness, inner listening, reflection, reading and meditating on scripture and other writings, growing in self-understanding and in awareness of God, other people, ourselves, and the creation. *Taking refuge* is to stay centered in God and our true life.

We experience painful losses and changes. We become anxious, preoccupied, depressed, fearful, angry. We drift into patterns of thinking and living promoted in our culture that are not physically, spiritually, or ethically healthy. In many ways, we get out of touch with our true selves and what truly matters. Refuge becomes crucial. The 30 minutes or hour we give each day to our set-aside inward journey time. A day or few days we take to unplug, to rest and re-center body and spirit. The moments throughout the day when we simply sit or walk quietly, breathe with awareness, come back into the present moment, and open ourselves to God’s presence everywhere around and within us. Mission groups take refuge together by devoting a significant part of their meetings to prayer and silence, sharing their lives with one another, and grounding themselves in the vision and call to which they have responded. We take refuge together when we worship as a community. This small chapel is sacred because it has been devoted to the time we spend together, opening to God’s presence, love, and will for us. We take refuge also when we open to the creation that surrounds us and of which we are a part. So we take refuge here together, remembering through our worship and on these grounds who we are in God. We touch our true life. If we do not take refuge, individually and corporately, we only contribute to the fear, despondency, confusion, or anxiousness around us. We practice taking refuge so that we may be solid and alive, not only for our own sake but for the sake of other people and the world.

We take refuge in the community that practices prayer and the life of God’s love that we know in Jesus. The Church of the Covenant is our *sangha*, our practice community, as the Buddhist would say. Our reading from 1 Peter speaks of Jesus as the “living stone” to whom

we come. Then we ourselves become “living stones built into a spiritual house.” This image sounds strange at first, but is actually perfect. We have firmness and solidity when we are faithfully grounding our lives in God through the practices of prayer and of outward service to which we devote ourselves. When that is happening, we are living, full of life, because God’s spirit is able to move in and through us. We are a house of living stones! We are both solid and alive!

Being part of a community that practices taking refuge in God nourishes our spiritual growth and maturity. There is no perfect community. It is important that we start with our own commitment to the one we have. Our community, with its weakness and imperfection, is the very community God has called together here to be a “house of living stones,” a community of God’s love known in Jesus and lived out in the lives of his disciples.

In all of this, we are taking refuge in God through our discipleship to the living Christ. Jesus says that he is going ahead of the disciples in order to prepare rooms, or dwelling places, in God’s house for them. We might think that this means only life after death. However, Jesus in John’s gospel speaks a lot about “dwelling”. God dwells in him, he dwells in God. His disciples, by dwelling in him, dwell also with God and God with them. This is the inter-dwelling of God with us and in us, and us with one another, all in and through the life of following Jesus, the life of discipleship. Jesus did not mean that we dwell with God only after we die. We dwell with God right now, in this life, in community. It is our refuge.

You know the way to where I am going, Jesus says. Thomas responds, How can we know the way? Jesus answers, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know God. You have seen in me what it is like when God dwells fully in us and we in God. So we can say as Christians, I take refuge in Jesus as the way, the truth, the life. By staying close to him, we find our true life, what Jesus calls “eternal life.” And it is both now and forever.

These words have always been used by some to say that Christianity is superior to other religions, that becoming a Christian is the ONLY way to God. This view promotes intolerance and ignorance of traditions other, and older, than our own. That is the very opposite of Jesus, teachings and spirit. These words of Jesus’ in John’s gospel were not spoken in the context of other religious traditions. Jesus spoke them within his own tradition, which was Judaism. He was saying that within his tradition, he is the way, the truth, the life, as opposed to what he calls earlier the false shepherds or leaders of his people. Using this text to make an exclusive claim for Christianity also ignores places in the gospels where Jesus himself affirms all who are seeking to do God’s will(e.g. Mark 3:31-35). And it ignores the

places where Jesus clearly points away from himself to God (e.g. Mk. 10:17-18).

Jesus identifies himself as way, truth, and life to be lived--not as a set of beliefs or a doctrine to be promoted or defended. It is about living the way Jesus lived and taught and to which he points, the way of our true life as human beings created by God. John's gospel says that the "word" became flesh and lived among us. In him we see and receive what it means to live as we are meant to live, out of love, which is the nature of our relationship with God and one another. Jesus is saying that when we take refuge in God through him, we find our dwelling place. It is our true home that we can touch and live out of right here and now. Just as God's "word" was incarnated in Jesus, so can it be in and through us and the way we live.

I would say it this way: For me Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. That is the way I have chosen and in which I continue to grow and find life. There is nothing about this that condemns or is superior to those who follow other paths. Exclusive and deep devotion to following Jesus DOES NOT mean exclusion of others or what they can teach us. I find that the more deeply I understand and practice out of my own spiritual tradition, the more appreciative I become of other spiritual traditions. I find it true also that the more I learn from other spiritual traditions, the more my own faith and practice is enriched and deepened in understanding and commitment.

Taking refuge in God, in Jesus, in the community of faith is an important way of understanding what we call the spiritual life. It is seeking refuge in what is good and true, in who we really are and are made to be. It is seeking refuge in what is most real, our true identity as children of the living God. And if our seeking refuge in God is humble, sincere, and consistent, then the God whom we meet, the Jesus whose spirit we share, the community whose life encourages us, will enable and strengthen us to live as those who have something life-giving to offer. We will understand and experience in some small way the astounding thing that Jesus said to his first disciples--You will do even greater things than I have done! You will do it where you are, in your own times and places and relationships, in the circumstances and needs that are part of your life and the life of the world. You will do it through the callings God sounds in your heart and the gifts God gives you to share.