

“Refugees”

Psalm 71

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

October 17, 2021

University Baptist Church

Minneapolis, MN

Refugees. That’s the title for today’s sermon. As you know, we are considering this year the concept of sacred spaces. We think of this great building and these holy grounds as sacred. We also consider the space between us as sacred—the mystery in which God continues to create, redeem, sustain and renew us. We consider holy longing as sacred space, too.

Holy longing, that’s what this psalm and this season seem to be crying for.

We long to be free of masks.

We long to be free of sickness.

We long to breathe freely.

We long to have our streets and our schools safe from gunfire.

We long to see each other in all of our messy holy chaos—for it is from chaos that creation begins.

That’s some holy longing.

We long to know the truth and set us free.

We long for our perceived enemies to agree with us, for we are always right. Right?

We long for us to not demonize each other.

We long to live in that beloved community.

Holy longing is sacred space.

Let’s remember that we are dealing with trauma. Some of us are dealing with multiple traumas at the same time. And we are all grieving. We know that we long to be together again, but we have lost the expectation that we will get there soon or that we will get there without some difficulty. Our lives these past few years are filled with broken relationships, scattered friends and family, loss of jobs and the sense that there is security in which we can trust. We are walking around as trauma victims and trying to keep a brave face just to get through the day.

The psalmist knows this kind of loneliness. You can hear the holy longing for respect, for dignity, for affirmation, for physical and psychic and spiritual safety.

Do not cast me off in the time of old age;

do not forsake me when my strength is spent.

¹⁰ *For my enemies speak concerning me,*

and those who watch for my life consult together.

¹¹ *They say, “Pursue and seize that person*

whom God has forsaken,

for there is no one to deliver.”

And the Psalmist looks to God when everyone else has forsaken them. And in their holy longing they are seeking refuge.

Refuge, safety, protection, sanctuary are all variations on a theme.

Psalm 71 uses refuge three times in the opening verses, let alone its synonyms:

¹ *In you, O Lord, I take refuge;*

let me never be put to shame.

² *In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;*

incline your ear to me and save me.

³ *Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress,^[a] to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.*

⁴ *Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.*

And the one who seeks holy protection or refuge is a refugee. Don't we all want protection from the unjust and cruel?

God's faithfulness in spite of evidence to the contrary is a theme throughout the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis, Abe gets to the Promised Land but then needs to flee because of famine. Then he might not have descendants. Even poor Moses is left looking at the Promised land from Mount Pisgah, a dream unfulfilled. The question shifts to Israel's faithfulness in the prophets. The exile wonders about God's absence.

In the New Testament, Jesus is killed by the state, lynched on a cross in public humiliation. And the people wonder about God's absence once again. But on the third day, Jesus rises again and encourages the people to rise up as well. Rise up and remember that you are not alone. Rise up and make your voice heard, even if it shakes a little. Rise up and remember that God is your refuge when you feel abandoned and forsaken. But rise up.

This psalm describes sacred sanctuary. Safety from enemies.

A church is a place of refuge, or at least it should be. It's a place where we can feel free to just be. It's where we don't have to put on airs.

Rob Dyer wrote an article entitled "They're not coming back", he said that we as a church need to reintroduce ourselves as a place that can tend the wounds this pandemic has opened. We need to hold people in their trauma and remind them of this great story that we share.

Why do we spend time together? Why do we take an hour or more every week to go through this ritualized connection? Can't we find something better to do? The world would say yes. But we spend this time together to consider humbly that we are not God. There is a power greater than us that can restore us to sanity. We come here to name our holy longing and to declare that we need help, from God and from each other. We seek refuge in the one who sees all of our flaws and loves us anyway. We are refugees.

But here's the rub, the refugee is no more deserving of the safety of God than anyone else. Everyone is deserving. Even though the refugee is making a case for their protection. But notice that they are not calling out their own righteousness. Instead, they are declaring that it's in God's nature to rescue anyone and everyone who calls.

Notice that God does not answer in this psalm. God is silent. But what is not silent is the psalmists holy longing.

For what do you long?

What emptiness needs to be filled?

What holy longing needs a response?

Sometimes, if you can't find the words yourself for a prayer, you can't go wrong with telling God, I'm longing. I am seeking refuge. Help me.

¹⁷ *O God, from my youth you have taught me,
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.*

¹⁸ *So even to old age and gray hairs,
O God, do not forsake me,*

*until I proclaim your might
 to all the generations to come.^[a]
 Your power¹⁹ and your righteousness, O God,
 reach the high heavens.
 You who have done great things,
 O God, who is like you?
²⁰ You who have made me see many troubles and calamities
 will revive me again;
 from the depths of the earth
 you will bring me up again.
²¹ You will increase my honor,
 and comfort me once again.*

Just this past week, a beloved principal in the Roseville Public schools took his own life. Brian Koland's family wanted it to be known. They wanted people to remember each other, to hold each other close, and to advocate for health. Of course a death like that triggers some of us. And I think it's better to name this than it is to dismiss it or minimize it.

We are all carrying something. We all have some holy longing. Church is where we gather all of those longings and bring it to the only one who can handle it, our ultimate refuge and strength.

When you are feeling down and troubled, remember that you are not alone. If you have longing, imagine it as a holy longing. Remember that you are among a group of refugees who are also longing to be heard, accepted or even seen. We refugees, all of us need a holy moment to remember that we need God's help. So take some time this week to pray Psalm 71 alongside your crazy normal days. Pray it and pay attention to your holy longing. Because that's what God really wants.

¹ *In you, O Lord, I take refuge;
 let me never be put to shame.*
² *In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
 incline your ear to me and save me.*
³ *Be to me a rock of refuge,
 a strong fortress,^[a] to save me,
 for you are my rock and my fortress.*