

Upon This Rock, He Built ... Psalm 71:1-6

Today, we stop to spend time inside one the least glamorous of the 150 psalms. How about that opening sentence to grab your attention and to stimulate your interest?

You will remember that during the summer, I am using the psalm from the lectionary each week as the text for the sermon.

Today, the lectionary suggests Psalm 71:1-6 as the reading.

It is not very original in that the first four verses are almost identical to the first four verses in Psalm 31.

The language is not as graphic as some of the other words that we have considered over the past three months.

This psalm does not talk about God's smoldering anger or buckets of tears.

The psalmist does not seem quite as angry, as hurt, as disappointed, or as vindictive as the writer in other songs.

Because of its lack of sensationalism, this psalm may apply to more of us right now than the others.

Sometimes, you can read the psalms and think that they have nothing to do with you unless you are living at the end of your rope.

This psalm is for the person who needs an assurance that the God about whom we talk really exists just as we describe Him.

The song was sung in worship. It apparently was not reserved for major days of confession and repentance, as were some of the songs.

This song was not used in worship when the congregation was suffering some huge calamity or disaster.

This song was sung as a regular prayer in worship, pleading with God to be who God is.

It is not a song encumbered with doubt about God's ability or about the singer's survival. Rather, it is a song about God's consistency.

In short, the song says, "*I have trusted You, God, all this time. Don't fail me now.*"

In other words, "*God, be Yourself. Be the One in whom I have put my faith all these years.*"

You will find this song one that is helpful to sing if you are living today through the bumps and bruises of life.

This song should be in your songbook if the sun shines very clearly on some of your days; but on others, the clouds never seem to go away.

You have trusted God through many days in the past. You have found His presence through some very dark moments.

Through it all, you have maintained the ability to sing of God's faithfulness, such as the words of the old Gospel hymn, "*On Christ the solid Rock I stand.*"

But this song is about those moments when you pray very quietly to God (so no one else can hear) for an extra dose of His presence.

You pray, because you can do nothing else, that all of those things that you heard and believed about God are true.

It is one thing to sing in worship, *"Praise God from whom all blessings flow;"* it is another thing to praise God when the blessings are not flowing so readily in your life.

It is one thing to sing, *"Our God is an awesome God;"* it is another thing to affirm that God is awesome even when your world seems very small.

It is one thing to stand in this beautiful sanctuary and sing, *"Great is Thy faithfulness;"* it is another thing to praise His faithfulness when the winter of your soul never seems to thaw.

It is one thing to sing, *"To God be the glory"* when the world seems to be going generally in the direction that God designed for it; it is another thing to give God the glory when horrible things man has done.

It is one thing to sing, *"A mighty fortress is our God"* when we are feeling strong; it is another thing to sing of His security when we feel vulnerable.

It was great when we sang a moment ago, *"Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation! O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!"* particularly for those who feel healthy.

Did you realize that we sang, *"We love Thy name, we love Thy laws"* in the second verse of *"Come, Holy Spirit, Dove Divine"*? That is well-received as long as we don't spend too much time thinking about how we violate His laws.

In a moment, we will sing, *"On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; All other ground is sinking sand;"* and that is thrilling to sing as long as we do not feel our feet shifting on the uneven pressures of living in this world.

The 71st Psalm is for those days when the other songs are hard to sing. You will find Psalm 71 helpful when you particularly need God to be what all those great hymns claim Him to be.

*"God, I have sung all of those words.
I have committed to believing these truths about you.
Today, I need You to be that God."*

One Word, Many Meanings

I can imagine the author of this song has paused under a rock cliff that has formed a cave in the landscape of his ancient world.

In the shelter of this rock cave, he prays for God to be especially active in his life. In that moment, he looks around at all the symbols that the rock cave means for him.

He starts to sing.

It is not a bad exercise for any of us to try. Look around you sometime, and imagine how many different descriptions of God surface from what you see.

For instance, look into your backyard this afternoon and find the many truths that are revealed about God through the trees, the flowers, the birds, and the other images of creation.

God is so big that one image can unveil a host of meanings of who God is and how God is.

The psalmist stops inside a cave, and everything he sees reminds him of God.

I have always been intrigued by the idea that dialects in Alaska have many words, or developments of words, for snow.

In Texas, there are many words for heat; and you have learned some of those words over the last couple of weeks.

I understand that there are different words in Alaska for snowflake, frost, fine snow, drifting particles, clinging particles, fallen snow on the ground, soft deep snow on the ground, crust on fallen snow, fresh fallen snow, fallen snow floating on water, snow bank, snow block, snow cornice, snowstorm, blizzard, and others.¹

What words would you use to describe God? God is so large that one word does not encompass Him.

Come in with me to this rock cave. Walk under this rock overhang and into the shadows of this cave, and learn something about God.

During the course of these 6 verses, the psalmist employs 6 different descriptions of God, all of which include some rock-like quality of God.

I won't encumber you with the Hebrew words, but I can tell you that each of the words is completely different from the others.

1. "In You, O Lord, I have taken refuge (khasa) ..." (Psalm 71:1).

The word "refuge" describes a rock that is protecting us from the elements or from the pursuit of an enemy.

The basic meaning of this word is protection.

First and foremost, we experience the sense of protection in this cave. It is protection from the heat outside, from the wild animals outside, and from whatever may be pursuing us outside.

The psalmist sees God like that cave. God is the protector.

2. "Be my rock of refuge (tsur maohn), to which I can always go" (Psalm 71:3).

The phrase "rock of refuge" depicts an enclosed location where people can meet together in security.

You might be interested to know that this Hebrew word is pronounced Ona, similar to the town near us.

We gather inside this formation of rock, and we remember that God is like a safe dwelling place.

3. "For You are my rock and my fortress" (Psalm 71:3b).

¹ <http://www.princeton.edu/~browning/snow.html>

While the English translations don't make the distinction, again we have another word for "rock" appearing here.

This time the word that is used means lofty.

As we sit in the cave, we look up at the ridge that juts out from the top.

God is like a cliff that overlooks the possibilities that may harm us.

There is assurance in having the perspective above everyone else. This is power, safety, advantage, and hope for those who can see their landscape from above it.

4. "... and my fortress" (Psalm 71:3b).

As the writer sings about God, his Rock, he imagines how the security of the cave in which he is hiding allows him to take control of the situation.

By hiding in the rock, he can capture his prey as it walks by the open door. In other words, the rock removes him from being the victim.

The word that he uses for fortress means net. Its root word is to hunt.

The song is about how God, just as the cave, turns his life from being hunted to hunter, from victim to victor.

5. "For You have been my hope..." (Psalm 71:5).

Sitting there, in the protection of the rock, the singer starts feeling more hopeful. He begins to believe that life may turn around for him

This word means to wait in expectation. Instead of running all the time, the rock reminds us that sometimes it is better to wait, to be still, and to be quiet.

Once more, that is how God is. He gives hope to those who wait.

6. "...my confidence since my youth" (Psalm 71:5).

The word confidence is the word safe. Inside the security of the rock cave, there is safety.

Within the shadows of the rock, the singer implores God to be the God in whom He has trusted.

As he looks at the rock walls around him, he remembers that God is my Protector.

As he looks around the cave, he remembers that God is my safe dwelling.

He looks up at the overhang, and he remembers that God's lofty grandeur gives him a perspective above all others. God is my victor.

Looking out from his vantage point into the wilderness just beyond the rock, he remembers that God is strength over all situations. God is my strength.

The stillness of the rock gives him hope, knowing that God is hope and offers that hope to all who become quiet in Him. God is my hope.

Finally, the rock gives him confidence, because he feels safe. God is my confidence.

Can you see yourself sitting in the shadows just inside the cave, protected from the outside?

I can picture myself in that rock enclosure, and the psalm gives me music to reflect on who God is.

I hope you will allow yourself to go there. There is such peace, stillness, and refreshment within the rock of Psalm 71.

But the more I read this psalm and considered this sermon, I realized that there is much more than a description about God here.

It always is more than a description of God. For what do you do with a description?

This song is about making these descriptions about God a part of how we experience God.

The song is about engaging these qualities of God as they become part of our lives.

The song is about what you and I will do with a God who is our protector, our dwelling, our victor, our strength, our hope, and our safety.

It is one thing to know who God is, but it is a better thing to experience who God is.

One Song, Many Responses

There are so many words to describe the rock that is God in this psalm. What I found to be so interesting is that every description requires something from you and me if we are to experience that part of who God is.

1. As we sit in the embrace of this rock, we sing, *“In You, O Lord, I have taken refuge (khasa) ...” (Psalm 71:1).*

But for God to be protector, I must be willing to walk into the arena of His protection. I have to place myself in His protective care.

I have to enter the cave if the cave is going to protect me.

The rock does not step out and spread itself around me. I have to take the step into the cave.

That demands faith. We can't see all the way; we can only see our next step.

We have to walk there.

2. We sing, *“Be my rock of refuge (tsur maohn), to which I can always go” (Psalm 71:3).*

For God to be my safe dwelling, I have to be willing to make Him home. The image is not a quick resting place, or a haven to which we run occasionally.

This rock is home. It is the place we know.

3. We sing, *“For You are my rock and my fortress” (Psalm 71:3b).*

For God to be my victor, I have to step out on the ledge with Him. Remember, this is the word for lofty.

This idea demands that I step outside of my comfort zone and trust that God is the stable rock.

I have to go out on the ledge a little to benefit from the perspective that His loftiness provides.

4. We sing, *“... and my fortress” (Psalm 71:3b).*

God is my strength. But for Him to be my advantageous strength over those who pass by, I have to trust Him and be willing to come into His presence.

It does me no good to stand outside the cave. My strength in Him is found in my place within Him.

We speak about inviting Jesus into our heart. This image is that we take our heart into Jesus.

Perhaps we should do both.

5. We sing, *“For You have been my hope...” (Psalm 71:5).*

God is my hope. But again, that requires something from me. I can only find hope in Him when I am still enough to wait on Him.

We think of hope in the sense of working out all the dilemmas. The hope of the rock is that we wait and trust.

Hope comes to those who wait. Hope rarely comes to those who run.

6. We sing, *“...my confidence since my youth” (Psalm 71:5).*

For God to be my confidence, I must find the source of my safety in Him, not in the safety that I can manufacture through world securities.

There are many people, books, and theories that aim to build your confidence. Inside this cave, confidence comes from realizing that we are safe in His walls.

Thus, we sing the song in worship. We sing many songs like this in worship.

They are declarations of who God is.

This psalm reminds us that we have to do something if we are to experience that God.

Come inside the cave. Make this new place your home.

Stand out on the ledge. Stand behind the shadow of His presence.

Wait for Him. Put your confident trust in Him.

One day, Jesus was asking His disciples who they believed Him to be. Simon responded, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).*

With that confession, Jesus pronounced, *“I tell you that you are Peter (which means rock), and on this rock I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18).*

On this faith rock, He builds what no one can defeat. That is the God about whom we sing. That is the God of the rock.