

Sheltered by God

The psalmist takes cover in God like a stranded hiker seeking refuge beneath an overturned tree.

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I don't often focus on the appointed psalm. I read it every day but usually let the words wash over me. In our tradition, the psalm is more of a response to the first reading than a reading itself. Like a hymn, when it speaks to me, it is usually in the middle of the service—too late for it to take root in a sermon. This week, though, the words of [Psalm 71:1-6](#) feel like more than a passing prayer. They are words in which I want to linger:

- 1 In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge;
let me never be ashamed.
- 2 In your righteousness, deliver me and set me free;
incline your ear to me and save me.
- 3 Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe;
you are my crag and my stronghold.
- 4 Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the clutches of the evildoer and the oppressor.
- 5 For you are my hope, O Lord God,
my confidence since I was young.
- 6 I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have been my strength;
my praise shall be always of you.

I like to go for walks and day hikes, losing touch with people and electronics for a few hours out in the woods. But I don't hike far enough or long enough to have ever needed to scramble for shelter. I remember an informational hike with a naturalist who encouraged us, if ever stranded, to look for the rootball of an overturned tree as a possible place to take refuge. The hollowed out hole in the ground, the overhanging mass of roots and dirt, and the surrounding leaves can provide some shelter from the elements. Of course, one dreams of finding a cave or even a large crack in a rock face to crawl into during a bad storm or overnight. I think that's what the psalmist had in mind when he imagined God as the crag and stronghold in which the psalmist has taken refuge.

I don't often think of hiding in God. Maybe that's because I take my house, my car, and my overcoat for granted—sources of shelter that are always close by. Or maybe it's because I take God for granted—the never-failing one whose presence is true but unseen. But the psalmist knew what it meant to take cover in God, to hide from the enemies, to wall up from threats, to be defended by the Almighty. Still, I wonder what that looked like.

So often the protection that God offers is as transparent as the wind and as open as the night sky. God sends us out into the world as vulnerable as the prophets—as sheep in the midst of wolves. The crag in which we take refuge is rarely a crack in the rock, a turret in the castle, a shelter underground. As the psalmist prays, our shelter is God.

We take refuge in God not by walling ourselves off from the threats around us but by encountering them clothed with power from on high. Sometimes, in the face of violence or abuse, we do run and hide, and we pray that God would keep us hidden. Often, though, we look around and find no where to take cover except in God. And still God is our refuge and strength, our crag and our stronghold.

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