

Following the Call

Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

I pray these words before every sermon, a prayer for God's intervention in the saying and the hearing of the words of every sermon. And it is a prayer that is grounded in the strong belief in God as our rock and salvation, our fortress and our refuge. When I think of a fortress, I think of a huge structure with impenetrable walls, made of the strongest stone. But when I think of a refuge, I think of a place to hide and rest in comfort. I think of a fire glowing in the fireplace, warmth and fuzzy blankets, the smells of baking. And, since our Covid experience, I think of a blanket fort. I wonder what a refuge looks like to you?

A fortress is a huge space that can protect all the people in the land, but I think of a refuge as a small, cozy space, a get-a-way, that offers me renewal precisely because it is isolated and private. This Psalm tells us that God is both for us—a place of protection for all of us, while also a place of renewal and rest for each individual. God offers great walls that no enemy can scale where we can gather in safety with all of our community, but God also offers a place of peace and quiet, a place of solitude. A fortress, though, is also a space where we confront others—armies come and siege fortresses. These images of God remind us that whatever might try to shake us, however much our world reels, there is safety and comfort with

God—personal and collective safety and comfort. They also remind us that we are faced with confrontations of some kind, but God, our fortress, helps us get through those confrontations.

This last year, we have had a lot of reason and need to rely on God. As we have had to shelter in the literal refuges of our homes, we have sheltered in the loving arms of God, praying and hoping for protection from the virus and from violence, praying and hoping for racial justice, praying and hoping for a just peace and for solutions to the divides within our nation, our community, and our families. And so we have prayed: “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God.”

I asked the children if they thought that, when the pandemic is over, they might remember finding God during these times and in our spaces of refuge. Will we look back and recognize the way that God entered our lives?

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Nathaniel recognizes Jesus almost immediately. Hearing about him from afar, Nathaniel had his doubts, wondering if anything good could come out of Nazareth. I suppose we need to assume it was not a town with a good reputation. But as soon as Jesus offers him proof of a miracle, Nathaniel believes and becomes his disciple. It was a small miracle. Jesus tells him that he saw Nathaniel under the fig tree before Philip called him. But Jesus was nowhere near the fig tree, so he must have seen Nathaniel in a vision, in a dream, or in some other miraculous way. It’s a small miracle, and our common sense could

probably come up with a rational explanation for it. But Nathaniel recognizes it as a miracle, and it's because of that recognition that he becomes Jesus' disciple.

In what ways have you been protected, comforted, or even confronted by God during this last year? Do you recognize God in those moments?

I have seen a lot of God through this time. I felt myself confronted by God in June, when Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd were murdered and we, as Christians, were asked how we might work to promote racial justice in our country. I felt confronted by God through the conversations our church has had with Grand Ledge United, when someone asked what we, as a church could do to support their unifying work of inclusion, diversity and equality, and their answer was to be more publicly vocal and active in anti-racist work. And I felt myself confronted by God when watching with horror as our Capital was attacked on January 6th, and Christians all over the nation were asking how we could have let things get so bad in our country that something like that could happen. During this year of quarantine, these events rang louder and got more of our attention precisely because of the pandemic—our emotions have been more volatile and so many of us have been at home. Being in our fortresses and refuges has allowed us more opportunity to be confronted by social and racial injustice. Can we see these confrontations as a miracle, as a way that God has reached into our spaces? Could such confrontations with our

consciences be a way that God might be trying to offer protection to those in need?

But I have also seen God in the outpouring of love and care of people around this nation, as they rallied to support racial justice, as so many medical workers have put their lives on the line to care for those with Covid, and as so many have embraced the need for masks to try to save one another's lives. And I have seen God's care in the profound love and support in this congregation as so many of you have reached out to one another during this pandemic, sending cards, making calls, doing porch visits, providing meals, creating children's activities, creating blessing bags and being a blessing. I have seen it in your service to the congregation, as you continued your work on the church's boards & teams, as you stepped up to fill vacant positions, to learn new tech, and even formed a search committee for our new admin. And I have seen it in the way that many of you raised your pledges, knowing that there were those in church who had lost their jobs and couldn't pledge at all. I have seen it in the loving and dedicated work so many of you have done to promote racial and social justice in our Grand Ledge and greater Lansing community, and to support those in need with your time, talent, and money.

I have felt God's presence powerfully over and over again during our worship services, as you all pray and connect from afar. Through music, pageants, readings, guest sermons & guest children's sermons, you have let the Holy Spirit work through you

and in you, leading us all in worship, helping us to share our griefs and our joys, keeping us together as a congregation.

And lest you think that these things that you have done were small, maybe not a big deal, I will share one story of the many I have heard this year. People both in and outside our congregation have told me how much hope and joy they feel from just getting a card, how their fears were lifted by a call, how the music or prayer from a service pulled them out of despair, or how a meal dropped off on their doorstep helped them feel loved. For me, it was the Taize service led by our worship team last year on Maundy Thursday. My daughter, Emily's, case of Covid seemed to be getting worse that day. Her breathing was more labored, her chest hurt, and she seemed lethargic. I was considering taking her to the emergency room, but thought we'd watch the service first and see how she was doing. We lit a candle and sat in bed in my darkened room, meditating on the candles on the screen and the music by Brandon and Chuck: "Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten, those who seek God shall never go wanting." I felt my soul fill with peace as these words were repeated. But when the service was over, my daughter said, "Mom, I really don't feel well," and then she fell asleep in my arms.

That calm I felt a moment before was replaced by something close to terror. Should I take her in to emergency now? She was so tired and was resting so peacefully. It really seemed like the service had allowed her to finally relax and rest. So I held her in my arms

and prayed the only prayer I could come up with in such a panic, which was “please, please, please.” My room was still dimly lit by candles, and the song from the service was still running slowly through my head, “Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten, those who seek God shall never go wanting.” A song that was balanced by “please, please, please,” which became less frantic and more like a slow, calm mantra.

Have you been in a space before that feels like peace? A space where the lights are low and warm, where you feel a presence that you can’t explain? That was what my room felt like that night. It was a refuge, a place where I met God.

The next morning, Emily woke up refreshed and feeling better than she had for weeks. She had gotten past the worst of the disease and was on her way to recovery.

These things may seem like small miracles, or maybe not like miracles at all. Common sense can explain them away. But I see God in them—in what happened with me and Emily, and in all the comfort, protection, and confrontations I have experienced in this last year. Part of following our call is doing exactly what you have done this year as members and friends of our church. And part of it is doing what Nathaniel did: It is recognizing the miracles of God, our fortress and our refuge. Amen.