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Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

## A ROCKY START

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude for the warm welcome I have received as I have been in the area just over a week. Many words and acts of kindness have already come my way. I am thankful for the support and I am thankful that APC clearly is a place that reflects the generous spirit of the God we worship here. I also need to ask for your patience as I begin to learn the context in which I now find myself. I've lived in a number of places, but this is the first time I've lived in Pennsylvania and I know it will take me a while to catch on to things around here that most of you know well. For instance, I sent in to the church office today's sermon title, "A Rocky Start," a few weeks ago, along with some information so the worship staff would be able to start planning for worship today. But it was only earlier this week that I realized that people who live near Philadelphia might see that title and think first of the story of a boxer played by Sylvester Stallone. I do give myself a little credit in knowing enough about the context here that I didn't get Drew Pearson from the Dallas Cowboys to introduce me today.

When we approach a scripture text to seek greater understanding, as we do in worship and at other times, we need to know something of the original context in which the text was written to then begin to explore how it relates to our current context. If we don't know how the good news of the gospel relates to us, it ceases being good news. We are looking at one of quite a few psalms today that use imagery about God as being like a rock. Was the psalmist speaking to God's emotional sensitivity? I hope not. Was it a way to describe God as being as flexible as a rock? Probably not. Stony indifference? Responsive as a rock? Smart as a rock? I think there are some other options.

One aspect of the context in which we are looking at this Psalm 31 text is what is called Mother's Day today. For some, this is a day of joyful celebration of

the experience of a loving mother. For others though, it can be a day of painful loss or a reminder of estrangement. Context matters. We don't know the precise context of the 31<sup>st</sup> Psalm, but the psalmist, which could have been King David himself, is seeking refuge from those who are understood to be enemies. We listen in on the psalmist's prayer: "Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge." How then is God like a rock or fortress, offering protection?

We might jump at the idea that God is going to be One who provides protection from enemies such as adversaries or even death. And yet, right after the psalmist refers to God as my refuge, is this line: "Into your hand, I commit my spirit." In Luke's telling of Jesus' crucifixion, those are the last words Jesus utters from the cross. How was God a rock or fortress for Jesus as he was dying? Jesus was not protected from his enemies or even from death. But the psalm that was upon his lips also spoke of being saved by God's steadfast love, and indeed, God's steadfast love is rock solid.

In our other reading, Jesus is described with rocky qualities as well, perhaps as a chip off the old block, this time the imagery is of a living stone for a spiritual house serving as the cornerstone of the foundation of those of us who are part of the household of God. Indeed, as such, the Jesus cornerstone can be connected to those who line up like a wall in one direction even while he can also be connected to those who line up in a totally different direction – ninety degrees difference held together by Christ. There is strength brought to the spiritual house when walls facing different directions are connected to each other through the cornerstone, Jesus Christ. This was an important message in a context where, under the pressure of the threat of persecution, early Christians were being torn apart from each other, and from their relationship with Christ. In our context, it is the reality of Christ's steadfast love that holds us together, helping us to live into our common identity as a part of God's people.

When we face different challenges, we might be inclined to chase after all kinds of things that we think will be a bedrock of support or a cornerstone of our lives. Fred Craddock was a preacher who tells the following story:

“I was out visiting in a home a few years ago where they’d adopted one of those dogs that had been a racer. It was a big old greyhound lying there in the den. One of the kids in the family – just a toddler – was pulling on its tail, and a little older kid had his head on the dog’s stomach, sort of using it like a pillow. The dog seemed to have a smile on his face, and looked real happy. So I said to the dog, ‘Are you still racing at all?’

‘No, no I don’t race anymore,’ he replied in a voice a lot lower than you might think would come from a greyhound.

I said, ‘Well, do you miss it – all the glitter and excitement of the track?’

He said, ‘No. No, I don’t miss it at all.’

‘Well, what’s the matter? Did you get too old to race?’

‘No. No, I still had some race left in me.’

‘Well, did you not win?’ I asked.

He sort of snickered and said, ‘I won over a million dollars for my owner.’

‘Then what was it? Bad treatment?’

‘Oh no,’ the greyhound answered, ‘They treated us royally when we were racing.’

‘Well, what WAS it then? Did you get crippled?’

He said, ‘No. No. No.’

‘Then WHAT?’ I asked.

‘I quit,’ he said. ‘I just plain quit.’

I said, ‘Well, why did you quit?’

Then he said, ‘I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit!’

He paused for a long moment as if remembering. Then he sadly whispered:

‘So I quit.’

He looked at me with such sorrowful eyes.

‘All that running, running, running, and what I was chasing wasn’t even real!’<sup>1</sup>

The steadfast love of God is rock solid and more real than granite or any rabbit at a greyhound race. The steadfast love of Jesus Christ is a real foundation that connects us to God and to one another. And we don’t have to run after it to catch God’s love. Each one of us comes to this place, and whether we are native to the Philadelphia area or not, we are each living in a different context. But the message and presence of God’s steadfast love is always a good place to start, whatever is going on in our lives. The rock of God’s steadfast love and the cornerstone of our foundation are with us and real, and, my new friends, that is really good news. All praise be to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories, Chalice Press, 2001.