"Taking Refuge"

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum
All Saints Sunday
November 1, 2026

1I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
2My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.
3O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.
4I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.
5Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.
6This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.
7The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.
8O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.
9O fear the Lord, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want.
10The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing…
17When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles.
18The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.
19Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all.
20He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken.
21Evil brings death to the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
22The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. *(Psalm 34: 1-10, 17-22)*

Fred Rogers, better known to the world as "Mister Rogers," was enduring a very difficult day in the neighborhood. A harsh critic had written a scathing article about his work. The piece had been hurtful, and his confidence was deeply shaken. Knowing that he needed refuge from the storm in his spirit, Rogers reached out to another well-known spiritual figure, Henri Nouwen. A Catholic priest from the Netherlands, Nouwen was a well-known mystic and a prolific writer. Rogers, a Presbyterian who had earned a Master of Divinity degree from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, was serving a congregation of children around the world through his popular daily television show. They operated in different worlds, but they had much in common. They both saw themselves as servant leaders. They were both faithful, gentle souls who believed deeply in the love of God and the power of kindness. Each admired the work of the other, and despite great distance they became fast friends. So, when that article cut him to the quick, Rogers immediately picked up a pen and paper and reached out to his faithful friend across the sea.

This is just the kind of shelter that the ancient writer of Psalm 34 was looking for. The psalmist was under siege and looking for deliverance. They had deep questions, and they were looking for answers. So, this poor soul, facing hard trouble, reached out to share their pain with someone they knew would listen, someone they knew would care.

On All Saints Sunday, as we remember those we have loved and lost, it is a natural time to ponder the question: where do we go, when we need consolation, when we need a place of refuge? Many of us do what Fred Rogers did – we reach out to family and friends for support. Hopefully you feel that this congregation, or another community of faith, serves as a refuge. Maybe you find solace in solitude, on a mountaintop, a beach, a lake, a park. Or you

may work through grief and pain with the discipline of a hobby, or the joy of reading, writing, art, or music. I have known others who dive deeper into work when things are uncertain. There are many places, and many ways, for us to find refuge. And many times these strategies work.

But sometimes the pit is so deep, or the pain is so intense, that the normal things don't work. The psalms are well versed in this kind of grief, and they universally point to the same source of ultimate refuge, shelter, and protection:

- Psalm 121 -- "*I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth*."
- Psalm 46 -- "*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging*."
- Psalm 34, our text for this morning – "*I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears… This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble… happy are those who take refuge in him."*

Where do we go when all else fails? We find our refuge in God.

This was another thing that Henri Nouwen and Fred Rogers had in common. As people of deep faith, each knew that – even if everything else fell away, even if every other help failed – God would always be there as a shelter in the storm. That faith is evident in the letter that Henri Nouwen wrote back to his friend, when he heard about the struggle he was facing. I want to read a portion of that letter to you now…

"Dear Fred… I read the article you sent me and can very well understand how much that must have hurt you. It must be really painful to be confronted with a total misunderstanding of your mission and your spiritual intentions.

It is these little persecutions within the church that hurt the most. I simply hope that you are not too surprised by them. They come and will keep coming precisely when you do something significant for the Kingdom. It has always struck me that the real pain comes often from the people from whom we expected real support. It was Jesus' experience and the experience of all the great visionaries in the Church, and it continues to be the experience of many who are committed to Jesus.

I don't think it makes much sense to argue with the writer of this article. He speaks from a very different plane and will not be open to your explanations. Some of the criticisms we simply have to suffer and see as invitations to enter deeper into the heart of Jesus. I won't send you some of the reviews I get of my books, but some are not very different from the tone of this piece. So I certainly feel a unique solidarity with you.

Let us pray for each other, that we remain faithful and not become bitter and that we continue to return to the center where we can find the joy and peace that is not of this world. Thanks so much for staying in touch with me.

Much love, Henri Nouwen"

I want to highlight three sources of refuge in this letter, all of which are completely and inextricably dependent upon God. The first is ***empathy*****.** Notice that Nouwen did not try to deny the pain Rogers was experiencing. He not only affirmed it, but made it clear that he understood it, that he had felt that same kind of pain himself. Listen closely to this: there are people out there saying that empathy is weakness. Do not ever believe them. It is a lie – the same lie they said about Christ, the same lie they said about the apostle Paul. Empathy

may look like weakness, but it is strength. It may look foolish, but it is wise. Empathy was central to life of Christ, and it is central to our life of faith.

Another place of refuge in this letter is ***connection to Christ.*** Paul preached this relentlessly – that while we do not celebrate suffering or seek it out, it does have a positive side effect. Suffering connects us to Christ. When we suffer, we know that Christ is close. We draw closer to Christ and we know him better, relate to him better, understand him better. This is what Nouwen was talking about when he wrote, "*Some of the criticisms we simply have to suffer and see as invitations to enter deeper into the heart of Jesus."*

And last but not least, a place of refuge is ***faithful reliance on one another***. In the friendship Nouwen and Rogers shared, they held one another up spiritually and faithfully. "*Let us pray for each other,"* Nouwen wrote, *"[so] that we remain faithful… that we continue to return to the center where we can find the joy and peace that is not of this world."*

Where do we go when all else fails? We find our refuge in God… and in godly people.

This past summer, toward the end of our pulpit exchange in Scotland, Stephanie, Kate, and I passed through the coastal town of Dunbar. Exploring the town center, I came across a statue of young John Muir. Later in life, Muir would emigrate to the United States, become a world-famous naturalist, and earn the nickname "Father of the National Parks." But he was born and raised in little Dunbar, Scotland, and it was there that his rigidly religious father immersed him in the Christian faith and scripture. From the very beginning, however, Muir's true church was the natural world.

The brass statue in Dunbar shows a blissful boy reaching his hand up to feed sea birds, and the pedestal below bears this quote, which is the opening statement from a memoir he would later write:

> *"When I was a boy in Scotland I was fond of everything that was wild… Fortunately around my native town of Dunbar, by the stormy North Sea, there was no lack of wildness... With red-blooded playmates, wild as myself, I loved to wander in the fields to hear the birds sing, and along the seashore to gaze and wonder at the shells and seaweeds, eels and crabs in the pools among the rocks when the tide was low; and best of all to watch the waves in awful storms thundering on the black headlands and craggy ruins of the old Dunbar Castle when the sea and the sky, the waves and the clouds, were mingled together as one."*[1]

Standing there on the street corner, I imagined a young Muir standing in the ruins of that old fortress, mighty waves crashing on the rocks below, and a storm thundering above in foreboding sky. Even back then, very little remained of the walls of Dunbar Castle. It was hardly a stronghold. And yet, even in the midst of a terrible storm, that barren ruin was a place where he felt the calming presence of God easing his spirit, and taming the chaos.

In times of loss, grief, or worry, we all need places like this – a place to stand where we know we are on solid rock… a fortress where we can take shelter from the wind and rain. It could be a good friend who shares your faith and helps you weather your storm. It might be a place that reminds you that even in the wildness of the world God is working to make things right. Whatever it may be, the psalms are clear that the ultimate refuge is the

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[1] John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* https://medium.com/a-moment-in-history/a-quote-from-john-muir-on-falling-in-love-with-nature-6fccf8084156

presence of God. When we stand in those places, where God is, even the hard, scary things can be beautiful.

Amen.