On this Second Sunday in Advent, we continue in our sermon series, Hope, as each day we get closer to the day we’re waiting for, Christmas Day, when we celebrate and remember anew Christ’s coming into the world. And if you were with us last week, you’ll remember as we looked at Isaiah 7 and betrayal in the land of Israel, that this season, for the church, isn’t just about cheery news in a cheery time of year. That might be what we see around us, and again it’s not so bad that there’s general goodwill and generosity for a few weeks, that might be what see around us, but that doesn’t fully get at why this season in the Christian faith is so important. In Christmas, we’re proclaiming the truth that God is with us, in the flesh, Immanuel, in Jesus born in Bethlehem, that Jesus as the Messiah is the fulfilment of all the hope of the story and Scripture of the people of Israel, but also all of the letdowns and disappointments too, and that message isn’t just cheery news in a cheery season; it is desperate news in our darkest hours. And it is in our darkest hour that the greatest light comes, and that is what we hope for: the light of the world coming into the world.

So in this series, each week, we are looking at a passage from the Old Testament that captures a dark hour in Israel’s history, and this week, we come to a song from a man who would be king, on the run, seeking shelter from the storm. Will you pray with me?

_Holy God for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen._

Ten years ago, the country of Armenia was just run by a few powerful families, and corruption was unfortunately pretty bad. But a few brave people spoke out against the corruption, including one man named Sasun Tamrazyan. Unfortunately, he started to get death threats, so he took his family, fled to the Netherlands, applied for political asylum and settled in a small town on the coast. A few years later the family joined the neighborhood church, and there they remained, up until just over a year ago.

The Tamrazyan family had initially been granted asylum in the country, but in the Fall of last year the government appealed their application, and in October of 2018, a warrant went out for their arrest to deport them back to Armenia. They had fled the storm from their home country, but it caught up to them.

The backdrop for the psalm we read a minute ago is similarly about a storm catching up to someone. That someone is King David, or more to the point, David who would later become King of Israel, but not yet. The current king is a man named Saul, and Saul was a jealous man. David’s career really took off when as a boy he killed a giant named Goliath in single combat—you may already know that story. After that, he enjoyed victory after victory. In the streets the people would shout David’s name with greater enthusiasm than Saul’s. And Saul was a jealous man. He began to see this David as a threat and tries to kill him. So David goes on the run, staying one step ahead of the king and his assassins, hiding out in the hill country.
Right before Psalm 57 begins, there are a few notes—we can often gloss over this sort of thing—but they tell us that the backdrop for this psalm is “when David fled from Saul, in the cave.” Here’s what happened—you can read more about this in 1 Samuel 24. Saul hears that David is in a certain area of rocky outcrops and hills, so he and three thousand men descend upon this area and start looking for him. The area where David’s hiding is on the western edge of the Dead Sea, and it’s about the same size, if you took the bend of the river we’re in and all the space between this bend in the river and I-40, it would be about the same size as this area where David’s hiding. Saul knew he was somewhere in there. Now that might seem like a lot of space to you, but if you put 3,000 men crawling all over it looking for you, yeah maybe you could find a good hiding spot and not be found, but you couldn’t move. So David flees into the depths of a cave, along with hundreds of men loyal to him, into this dark, confined space, unable to leave for fear of being seen, unable to make noise for fear of being heard. The storm had caught up to him, and it was raging right outside.

And in the midst of that storm, in this stinking, dark cave, come the desperate mutterings of a man on the run. “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.” “In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.”

The Tamrazyan family took refuge as well. When warrants went out for their arrest in the Netherlands to deport them back to Armenia, they sought refuge too. Not in a cave, but in the shelter of the community where they had made their new home: their local church. Their church community tried to advocate for them through the legal process, but to no avail, so for help the pastor reached out to the pastor at a larger church in the city of The Hague. So the Tamrazyan family sought refuge there, claiming sanctuary, according to some of the old laws of the country.

Some of you may be familiar with sanctuary laws or claiming sanctuary. It was halfway common in medieval Europe and in Ancient Greece and Rome before that, but the basic notion is that if you’re on the run from the law and you make it into a holy place, you can claim sanctuary, and the law can’t touch you. Now, you can’t leave, but you can’t be arrested either. If you’ve ever seen the movie The Hunchback of Notre Dame, there’s a big scene where Quasimodo swings down from the bell tower, saves Esmerelda, and swings back into the cathedral claiming sanctuary. That’s the gist of sanctuary laws, but they fell out of favor, mostly because they were exploited over and over again. I came across this one story from medieval England of a queen who’s king had been deposed, so she and her children were in danger, and they fled to the church and claimed sanctuary. And that was all well and good, but then the queen started moving all her stuff in, knocking out walls in the church to make room. I thought that was funny. But it was stuff like that that led to sanctuary laws being dropped over history. But in certain pockets, there are old remnants of those laws still in place, and one such case is in the Netherlands.

In Dutch law, and I think now it may have been changed, but as of a year ago, in Dutch law, police were forbidden from entering a holy place, entering a church while a religious service was taking place. Can’t go in. If there’s a worship service going on, the police can’t enter.

So when the Tamrazyan family took refuge in Bethel Protestant Church in The Hague, the pastor there arranged for there to be a continuous worship service, 24/7, around the clock, and as long as this worship service continued, the police could not come into the church to arrest the family. Started in late October of last year. Hundreds of clergy and laypeople alike rotated in and out in a continuous worship service, all to shelter this family while the storm raged outside. This continued for over ninety days. Ninety days of a never-ending worship service. I know what you’re thinking, Jay don’t get any ideas.
But as nice as I know three months straight of church might sound, it shouldn’t have had to happen that way. Such drastic measures shouldn’t have had to be taken. The Tamrazyan family shouldn’t have had to feel confined to a church for three months, but they were in the storm.

That’s how it feels, doesn’t it, when you’re right in the storm. When it’s raging around you. That there’s something not right about it. That you’ve been abandoned. That you cry out like the psalm does, “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge.” Sometimes you hear something back. Sometimes you don’t. And it can feel awfully lonely. Can be like David, surrounded by hundreds of his men, but they’re all in the cave, all in the dark.

I’ve been told that in any group of any size, you can just about count on that fact that 10% of that group is actively in a crisis, right now.

Look around you for a moment. There are about 100/300 people in this room right now. That means there are 10/30 of us who are in crisis, who are in the middle of a storm today. Some of you already know folks who are hurting. Some of you already know that this 10% means you this morning.

And if this is talking about you, maybe you came here today seeking some word of comfort, a place out of the rain, a place out of the storm, a safe place, a refuge, a sanctuary. And I hope you know you have that here. I hope you know that. That’s what we call this room after all, a sanctuary.

But I also hope you know that you’re not alone. First, that you’re not alone in suffering. When we’re in crisis, we can keep it to ourselves and that it’d be weird to show that we’re in pain, thinking that we’re the only ones for whom everything coming unraveled. But that’s not true.

Second, that you’re not alone without support. That in the fellowship and ministry of this church, there are people who will walk beside you, who will cry with you, who will pray with you. There’s the entire Diaconate, our church’s deacons, dedicated to the ministry of congregational care, here to pray with you after each worship service. There’s our Stephen Ministry, lay leaders in our church extensively trained to listen to and guide you in life’s hardest chapters. You of course have your pastoral staff, and I’m not sure we always recognize how lucky we are, because some churches are stuck only with pastors who are jerks like me, but you would have to go a long way to find another pair of pastors like Rachel and Mark who are as concerned and dedicated to being a pastoral presence in crisis.

Finally, and most importantly, I hope you know that you’re not alone because of the message we carry, the message of a baby born in Bethlehem, one whom the prophets told us would be named Immanuel, God with us. You are not alone, and you don’t have to live like you are.

A modern-day prophet wrote almost forty years ago, “Somewhere, somehow, somebody must have kicked you around some. Tell me why you want to lay there, revel in your abandon.” I’m speaking of course of the prophet Tom Petty, who also said, “You don’t have to live like a refugee.” [Don’t have to live like a refugee.]

Friends, you don’t have to live like a refugee. And that’s important for us to remember, because even though we might find comfort in the psalm’s words, “In the shadow of your wings I take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by,” in the whispered mutterings out of a dark, stinking cave, ultimately caves don’t bring us to wholeness and healing, because sometimes we
go into caves to get out of the storm, and that’s alright, but sometimes we stay in there. That’s not how it’s supposed to be. And it doesn’t have to be. One day the storm will pass.

David could’ve thought about staying in there. Could’ve hung up his spurs, withdrawn, because it wasn’t supposed to be this way. He was supposed to be God’s anointed king, but ever since, things had just gotten worse. And even after he did become king, and even though Israel did enjoy some good years, it didn’t fulfill anything. In the centuries that followed, there was letdown after letdown and failure after failure, with Israel’s kings leading the people away from the Lord and into more storms. But woven within that same story, that same history of kings, is the promise of another king, one who would come from David’s line and fulfill everything that had fallen short in years past. And that gave the people hope.

Because no matter how bad the storm got, it didn’t stop David from singing in the cave, “He will send from heaven and save me, he will put to shame those who trample on me. God will send forth his steadfast love and faithfulness.” And indeed, he has. It is the hope of Israel, and the hope of this season, that the darkness of the storm finds its refuge in a child born in a manger, God with us.

Hope has that power, to guide us until the destroying storms pass by. Had that power for the Tamrazyans. After over 90 days taking refuge in that church, after 90 days of a continuous worship service, the Dutch government relented, offering the family a safe future in the country. At one point, a newspaper interviewed the oldest daughter about the whole ordeal, and she said, “It was only hope that was sustaining them. If we don’t have that then I don’t know. I need hope to keep going.”

Friends, the day is coming when our hopes will be realized. So, hear again the good news according to Tom Petty: “You don’t have to live like a refugee.” The day will come when the storm passes and you come out of the cave. But until that day, may you have a place of refuge, a place where the promise of God with us rings true, a place of hope, and may this be one of them.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.