

Refuge and Strength

Rev. John Allen

Smokejumpers are specialized wild-land firefighters who parachute into remote areas to fight wildfires with hand tools in the wilderness.

Molli and I once took a tour of a smokejumper base in Montana, we got to see the plane, the ready-room where about a dozen or so firefighters were making repairs to their parachutes, and sharpening saw blades, ready for a call that might come in.

And in a small museum on the edge of the compound, some history of aerial firefighting, and examples of gear throughout the ages.

Something caught my eye, because at first I couldn't quite place what it was. It looked like a sleeping bag made out of tinfoil.

I learned that it was what is called a fire shelter, carried rolled up in a small pouch, a firefighter can unroll it, and lie beneath it if the fire threatens to overrun them.

Not ideal, but these devices have saved thousands of lives as firefighters who became trapped by wildfire took refuge beneath them as a fire burned past.

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When I was a child, my Dad taught me how to sail. I remember once we were sailing out in Boston Harbor when the weather took a serious turn.

Our boat felt smaller by the moment as the waves grew, in sight of shore and in busy waters, we were not in any mortal peril, but the feeling that suddenly our boat may not be up to the task, that feeling has stuck with me.

There are some storms our boats can weather.

There are other storms that are better spent in a safe harbor.

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Sometimes the answer is obvious. The flames are blocking out the sun. The forecast is for a hurricane.

But more often than not, there is this uneasy moment. Where we can be caught frozen between our options. Forge ahead or take cover? Keep going? Or turn back?

Have you ever faced a moment like this in your life? Confronted by some challenge that was perhaps daunting but not insurmountable? Scary, but possible...

Maybe it was some new opportunity that took a leap of faith. The prospect of becoming a parent.

A hard conversation that you were dreading.

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Our God is our refuge and our strength, the Psalm begins.

A very present help in trouble.

God is our refuge and our strength.

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God is our safe harbor, and our best sails.

God is the right tool to get the job done, and a shield against the heat and smoke when the job is too much.

God is our nap, and our espresso.

God is in the midnight oil, and God is in our head hitting the pillow with work undone.

God is our refuge and our strength.

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How do you need God right now?

Do you need a dose of courage to take life on?

Do you need a quiet moment away from the chaos?

Do you need a pep-talk? Or a shoulder to cry on?

God is our refuge and our strength.

Our refuge, and our strength.

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Most of us, I think, lean one way or another in our prayers.

For many of us, God is first and foremost refuge. God is that place where we turn to get away from the cares and troubles of life. This is the God we meet in sunsets, in quiet night skies, in those long gentle walks, in the arms of our beloved.

For many of us, our prayers arise as a shelter from the stormy blast. A shield against the heat and smoke. Our hearts remember to pray in those moments when we need escape.

And they are right. For God is our refuge.

Others of us turn to God first and foremost for strength. Our prayers most naturally arise in those moments when we are preparing to face some great obstacle, a big presentation, when we are steeling ourselves for a challenge.

These are the prayers at the edge of the diving board, and the apron of the stage, at the threshold of our child's bedroom. Our hearts remember to pray when we need courage.

And they are right. For God is our strength.

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God is our refuge. And our strength.

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So when you come to one of life's many challenging moments, or if you are, as I think many of us are, in one right now. You might ask yourself.

How is God offering me refuge? And how is God offering me strength?

Where has God made space for gentle grace? How is God building me up to face this challenge?

And if you notice you tend to lean on God more as a source of refuge, try looking to God as a source of strength and courage.

If you find you tend to rely on God as a source of strength, see how God may be offering you shelter and rest.

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Life is not one constant headlong charge.

Nor is true life made by shrinking away from every challenge.

Our lives are rhythms of advance and retreat. Of action and contemplation. Of motion and rest.

We cannot escape it with our minds and souls, any more than we can with our bodies.

And it is good to know, isn't it, that God is both these things to us?

That God is our stepping up and our stepping back. Our pulling together, and our falling apart.

God is in it all. With us.
Our refuge. Our strength.

Our very present help.

And so, the Psalm offers us, these words that feel so fitting today.

Even though the earth should change. The mountains shake in the heart of the sea.

Even though the waters roar and foam, and mountains tremble.

We will not fear.

We will not fear.

For God is our refuge and our strength.

