

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

10th Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: Psalm 61

Title: “My God is a Rock: Lead Me to the Rock”

I was channel surfing this last weekend and happened upon the end of a program highlighting the NASA program in the 1960's: Alan Shepherd, John Glenn and the crew of Apollo 11: Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Mike Collins. I watched as the race to the moon was chronicled yet again. I watched because I remember as a boy watching the black and white television set as Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon on July 20, 1969 and uttered those now famous words: “one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.” It was a magical moment.

The TV program ended with a view that had never been seen before with human eyes: the brightly lit blue and white orb of the earth rising over the surface of the moon. Wow! How impressive, incredible--all those words used to describe this great human accomplishment and the amazing beauty of God's vast creation.

But then news broke about Robin William's death and then Iraqi airstrikes happening again and unrest in Missouri after another young man was killed by police and the inspiration of that program that highlighted our great, almost unbelievable achievement of landing on the moon was dimmed. Oh, we can accomplish great things, can't we? As human beings created in the image of God, God has given us a lot of power, but there are some repeated experiences for which we still seem to have little understanding and are unable to find our own solutions. Why would someone as beautifully gifted as Robin Williams do such a thing? Why can't human beings resolve conflicts without using weapons that are designed and built to take lives? In our own lives, is there another way out when we feel cornered, when the answers aren't immediately obvious, when the way forward isn't clear? How do we deal with all the unknowns?

The Psalms know all about life's unknowns. Psalm 61 is the voice of someone who is in need of some help. The difficulty the psalmist faces isn't made clear. We hear the beginning:

1 Hear my cry, O God;
listen to my prayer.
2 From the ends of the earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grows faint;
lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

This is a demanding voice. It's not a request: God will you please listen to me. It's imperative: God, hear my cry. Listen!

What causes his heart to grow faint we are never told. Was it hunger or thirst or persecution by some enemy? Was it illness of some sort or a sense of separation from God? Was it mental illness, depression maybe? We don't know. All we really know is this is a cry for help. Something isn't right in his life. His heart is faint, not strong, not shooting adrenaline through his veins to provide a high energy response, but rather diminishing--bent toward giving up. It reminds me just a bit of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, "*Abba, Father,*" he said, "everything is possible for you. Take **this cup** from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will," (Mark 14:36). Jesus--facing what he would rather not face--nevertheless gives it up to God, trusts God with his faintness of heart. He, too, calls out to God.

The psalmist, though, tells God to "lead me to the rock that is higher than I." Although he's feeling faint, weak, he knows and trusts that God is able because God is higher. God has the capacity to help when he cannot help himself. He knows this because he's experienced it before: "you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe." This isn't the first time the psalmist has cried out to God. It's happened before when things were uncertain. God proved reliable in the past which leads him to come again as one good friend trusts another when facing difficulty. Except, of course, God is more than friend. God is the rock that is higher than I, a refuge and a strong tower.

I shared this story in a sermon back in June but it applies here, too.

Juan Monroy, a Christian journalist in Madrid, Spain, was among those reporters selected by the Spanish government to interview the American astronaut James Irwin, who was on a European tour after his Apollo 15 mission to the moon. Monroy asked the astronaut, "What did you feel when you stepped out of that capsule and your feet touched the surface of the moon?"

To Monroy's utter surprise, Irwin replied, "It was one of the most profoundly disillusioning moments of my life."

Monroy pressed the astronaut: "How could standing on the moon be so disappointing?"

Irwin explained, "All of my life I have been enchanted by the romance and the mystery of the moon. I sang love songs under the moon. I read poems by moonstruck poets. I embraced my lover in the moonlight. I looked up in wonder at the lunar sphere. But that day when I stepped from the capsule onto the lunar surface and reached down at my feet, I came up with nothing but two handfuls of gray dirt. I cannot describe the loss I felt as the romance and mystery were stripped away. There will be no more moon in my sky!"

Monroy observed further, "When we come to the place that we think we comprehend and can explain the Almighty, there will be no more God in our heavens."

—Lynn Anderson, "Moonlight and mystery," Heartlight Magazine, April 18, 2001, ©Heartlight, Inc. heartlight.org.

God is even higher than the heavens, beyond the moon and the stars and the sun. Yet, acknowledging that God is higher than I and higher than the heavens, the psalmist also speaks of a desire for intimacy with God:

4 I long to dwell in your tent forever
and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

He yearns for God's company. Some scholars suggest that the tent referred to is the Temple and that the wings may be those on the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies in the sanctuary where only the high priest could go to be in the presence of God. Be that as it may I wonder if tent means tent, a temporary shelter that can be easily taken down and set up again. So the psalmist may be thinking of living with God in the intimacy of a tent which, if you've ever went tent camping with your family, you know the quarters can be quite tight. But I love the image of tent camping with God, close to God and close to the family of God.

And the shelter of God's wings sounds a lot like Jesus preaching to Jerusalem: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." (Luke 13:34).

So God is both higher than I and yet intimate, close enough to live with and seek protection under God's wings. The psalmist seems to be asking for help because he's facing the unknown AND confirming his confidence in God who is both greater than he, grander than he, more powerful than he, but also God who is so intimate and close it's possible to metaphorically snuggle under God's wings.

Linda Gadson is the executive director of Rural Mission of South Carolina. As a youth pastor I led several mission trips to the Sea Islands in South Carolina where Rural Mission does its ministry of assisting island residents with home repairs and medical needs. And Linda is a great host. Teams work, of course, but one night there is a crab boil at which they take freshly caught crabs and boil them in a great caldron and then dump them on picnic tables for all to eat. Another night there's a classic southern meal of corn on the cob, ochre, corn bread and fried chicken. Linda and the people of the sea islands are wonderful hosts. But what I remember most about Linda is her unwavering faith. In a place of poverty, a place in which if you were ever to have a faint heart it would be here, Linda preached to us **"I am so thankful for a God who lives high but he looks low. I am so thankful for a God who lives high but he looks low."**

I've never forgotten that message I heard about 20 years ago.

What unknowns might you be facing in your life? Can you see the path ahead or is it completely concealed in the fog of uncertainty? Listen to the psalmist's prayer and make it your own because we are not alone, though sometimes it may seem so. When we don't understand the complexities, when people we admire disappoint, when conflicts still erupt into violence, it's clear we cannot heal our own faint hearts. We need someone beyond ourselves. We need God who is both higher than I and yet an intimate care giver. God who loves us beyond measure even when we sometimes can't feel it. Yet, when we can and do deeply experience God's love and faithfulness, then we too—along with the psalmist "...will sing praise of your name." Amen.