

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Duane M. Harris

August 24, 2014

Text: Psalm 27:1-6

Title: “My God is a Rock: Shelter of the Rock”

(Show video clip of interviews with two people who are without a home.)

“Ye, thou I walk through the shadow of death I will fear no evil.” Another Psalm that reminds us not to be afraid: “for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” I’ve tried to imagine what it’s like to be without shelter, without a home, and the fears that homelessness must certainly bring, but the truth is I’ve never been homeless and never been afraid really of being homeless.

I have a friend who lives in Florida where the number of homeless people is higher than in the north where the snow and cold makes living outside tougher. He has heard and read so many reports of panhandlers who make a decent living off the generosity of compassionate people that he’s jaded. Whenever we’re visiting them and we drive by someone holding a cardboard sign asking for help, he goes on about these people who abuse the good will of other people and cites the work of reporters who have written stories. The reporters have apparently followed some of them and discovered they live in a nice home with a nice car. “Posers,” he calls them. As a Vietnam vet who has experienced traumatic combat himself, it’s hard to argue with him when he struggles with feeling sorry for veterans who make up a significant number of those who are homeless. Even as I remind him that some people are not making this stuff up, that some people are genuinely without the resources they need to find stable shelter, and that it’s not fair to generalize about them, still my friend has issues with homeless people.

Maybe you do too. How many times I’ve heard people talk about those without shelter as being the cause of their own misery and that if they’d only get a job, they wouldn’t be in the fix they’re in. And yet, homelessness isn’t just about having a roof over one’s head, is it?

Thursday night, Lynn and I drove to Oscoda and went to the funeral home where yet another young man—a 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin only 26 years old—lost his life. We hadn’t seen this part of the family for a long time, but it didn’t take long to hear that the young man—who was a veteran—had trouble navigating his way in life: drug problems, medications, the latter of which ended his life due to improper dosage. Whether it was intentional or not is unknown, but there are strong suspicions.

I can’t tell you how tired I am of hearing of yet another person taking his life because the person cannot find meaning or joy. Homelessness is not just about having a roof over our heads, is it? For some—and maybe sometimes for us when life isn’t what we’d hoped or imagined it would be—homelessness can be about having no roof over our souls. When that kind of adversity strikes, then, where do we find strength and hope?

The portion of the psalm that Lakin read this morning reflects someone who is facing adversity. He writes of evildoers assailing him to devour his flesh which is hardly a lighthearted reference to the bill

collector calling on the phone to remind him he's late on his mortgage payment. He writes of adversaries and foes, of an army encamped around him, of war rising up against him and of the day of trouble. None of these are descriptions of the everyday tensions that raise our anxiety levels. These are life-threatening circumstances the psalmist faces and could have led him to give up or at least sink into a depression as a result of the threats before him. Because that is an option isn't it? When adversity rises in our lives, one option is to allow fear to lead us to give up, sink into depression and live into the kind of hopelessness that leaves us thinking there is no way out.

Fear is one of the primary internal reactions when we are challenged in some way. Many times in the Gospel accounts Jesus repeatedly told his disciples, "Do not be afraid." When he was preparing his disciples for his own death in the Gospel According to John, he tells them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid." (John 14) When he calmed the storm in Mark's Gospel account he asks the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (Mark 4) As he was teaching about worry in Luke's account, Jesus told the disciples:

<sup>32</sup> "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup> Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke 12)

Jesus' call not to be afraid comes because fear can leave us spiritually homeless. It can leave us feeling vulnerable, open to the elements, feeling lost and alone. And Jesus proclaims that God wants more for us than that: "...it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

The psalmist, too, knows the power of fear and proclaims the same confidence in God.

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid?

Or as the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the congregation in Rome: "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Romans 8:31)

When facing adversity in life, one option is to give in to fear that can lead to hopelessness and despair and a spiritual homelessness. Another option is to listen to the Spirit through the psalmist and trust in the power of God's grace:

<sup>4</sup> One thing I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the LORD,  
and to inquire in his temple.  
<sup>5</sup> For he will hide me in his shelter  
in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;  
he will set me high on a rock.

I wonder if when Jesus was preparing his disciples for his own death--as I mentioned a moment ago--this psalm was in the background. In John 14, he tells the disciples he was going to prepare a place for them in his father's house and that in God's house there are many rooms, promising them: "...I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

God's house, God's temple, God's shelter, God's tent: all metaphors for shelter in which we keep company with Christ who wants us to be with him. God wants us to be there, to seek shelter when we are afraid or lost or lonely.

Last week Penny Parkin gave me some information that her sister Sara asked her to pass on to me. It's about a ministry to homeless people in Midland that area churches are putting together. A rotating shelter: a model that has worked in cities across the country. Churches in Midland are being asked to house people for one week at a time. If we were closer to Midland I'd be asking this church to participate, because homelessness isn't just about not having--as Jesus put it--"no place to lay his head", but it's also about not having a place in which you belong, where no one knows your name. It can also be about not knowing where you can go for shelter OR--more to the point--not knowing WHO you can go to when your soul needs shelter and strength.

Which is where you come in. I wonder if you've considered that someone coming to worship might be looking for community, a place to belong, a place to find shelter from the loneliness that sometimes occurs in our lives. Are you sensitive to the possibility that God may be calling you to approach the person with a genuine interest in them as a human being, as a child of God? Just get to know them and value them as a human being, one of God's children, not for any ulterior motive like adding to the church membership, but to simply get to know them and value them, sharing your life with them. Invite them to lunch with you or have them to your home for dinner or call them to see if you can pick them up and bring them to church or attend the Loons game with you or maybe even join your small group.

It's not difficult to notice—is it?—that there are a lot of people without a spiritual home. It struck me again Thursday standing in the funeral home talking with cousins I haven't seen since the last family funeral.

Because we are blessed to be here and know that the God experienced in Jesus wants to give good things to God's children, it is our calling as receivers of God's grace in Christ to be guides to the shelter we have found, not to earn a notch on our spiritual belts but because it might just be that God will use us to save a life. And when we have been participants in God's saving plan, well that, dear friends, is a beautiful thing.

<sup>6</sup> Now my head is lifted up  
above my enemies all around me,  
and I will offer in his tent  
sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.