

## **Building a Faith on Jesus**

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### *St. Mark's and the importance of our foundation*

At a recent ministry gathering, I was speaking with the Diocesan Campus Missioner for the University of Texas, Noah Stansbury. His faith journey included twists and turns, which eventually landed him in The Episcopal Church as an adult. The Church that sent him to seminary, St. Mark's in Philadelphia, recently celebrated 175 years as a church together. During that time, together, they laid the foundation for ministries that stretched the country, and the world, including Missioner Stansbury's ministry.

At their celebration, the longest living member took a reporter over to the part of the church where a cornerstone was laid. The first stone. She told them how she remembered as a girl people were telling her how everything started with this one brick. The food cupboard where community members shop weekly: it started with that brick. The parochial school and neighborhood blooming around the building began with that single brick. One piece of a building can have a great deal of power. It is much the same with faith.

### *God as a Refuge for the Persecuted*

Our Scripture lessons today give a picture of the importance of building our faith and the outcome it can have for the larger church. Think of the Psalmist, who was likely fleeing from oppression and hurt. After his oppression, the first thing he does is account for his triumph so that others may know of God's victory. He writes this prayer as a tribute to God's goodness. This Psalm is often attributed to King David and his many victories over the plots against him.<sup>1</sup> It is appropriate that we read this Psalm during Easter when Jesus has just triumphed over death.

This is someone who could not find God and do God's will because of the trouble they faced. Instead, they flee everything that is comfortable: home, family, and friends. Then one must start over and try to find a new way to build faith. This Psalmist asks God to provide the same type of cornerstone that is present at St. Mark's: a place for them to flourish.

Before the Psalmist can do anything else: they acknowledge their brokenness and God's perfection. In the same way that Christians in Lent acknowledge our brokenness, the Psalmist acknowledges a need for a new path. This psalm is a hopeful plea for help,

“Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,  
for you are my crag and my stronghold;  
for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me.”<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing more the Psalmist desires than safety and refuge. It is the same desire that Christians hold in their hearts today. Yes, there is a great deal of trouble. There is also a good amount of comfort to be found in God that can lead us back to the paths of righteousness.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, Commentary on Psalm 31. *The Ultimate Commentary on Psalms: A Collective Wisdom on the Bible*.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 31:3

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 23

### *God as a cornerstone: What are we being built for?*

God wants us to perfectly love Christ so that we can perfectly know everlasting life. This knowledge takes a lifetime to learn. It is built on the foundation of God's unconditional grace, the teachings of scriptures, and the knowledge that when we need refuge - we can find it in God alone. This is the foundation of our faith; this is the cornerstone, that first piece to build upon.

Throughout this season of Easter, God is building Christian followers up to be more faithful servants of the Lord. This beautiful Psalm that Christ certainly knew himself is an example of this building faith. Psalm 31 is called a prayer from "the servant of the Lord," and it is clear that there were many servants who faced adversity and then ran to the Lord: King David (as mentioned before), Jeremiah, Moses, and now of course Jesus. The call of Christians today is to put that first building block of trust in God despite the difficult moments of life.<sup>4</sup>

The most difficult obstacle for a foundation in God is relying upon God for the *occasions* of our life rather solely for the length of our days.<sup>5</sup> If followers rely on God to guide their steps, the unfolding path ahead becomes less daunting. Like the disciples, many Christians today are afraid of what is to come: a medical bill that is too high to pay, separation from family, a social order that is not understood. Yet, something changes when someone says, as the Psalmist did, "My times are in your hand."<sup>6</sup> They are rescued from their enemies and persecutors, because fear is not holding their hearts. This is the message that God calls upon the disciples to hear when Jesus issues his farewell address in today's gospel.

### *Tie to Gospel*

Jesus' last words in the Gospel of Luke are Psalm 31 at his death, "into your hands I commend my Spirit"<sup>7</sup> and in many ways the image of being an intimate refuge for his disciples is embedded in this discourse: Jesus wants the disciples to know that he is prepared to share himself with them completely and intimately. Jesus is telling the disciples that regardless of the troubles and persecutions ahead of them, in Jesus they can find the same refuge as the author of Psalm 31 found long ago.<sup>8</sup>

This is a comforting thought for the Church today: the church is being perceived as overly judgmental, as irrelevant, and as too stuffy. There are those who seek refuge, within the Episcopal Church as well, because they feel a disconnect from the message of Christ and the direction of the church. Christians need to remember that it is in Jesus that our refuge can be found.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mays, J.L. (2011). *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>5</sup> Mays, J.L. (2011). *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 31:15

<sup>7</sup> Luke 23:45-6

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, K.M. (2014). *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary: John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

<sup>9</sup> LeMon, J. (2017). *Working Preacher: Psalm*. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-psalm-31-5-15-16-5>

*Growing from Christ as the Foundation of Faith*

A church's life is mirrored by the lifelong spiritual journeys most Christians take, often beginning in childhood. Much like that woman in the story from St. Mark's, every part of our ministry happens after the cornerstone of our faith is placed. Much like the beginning of Ernest's journey that we will witness in the Baptism at 11:00 a.m.

The life in Christ that lays ahead for us as individuals and a church depends upon Christ as our cornerstone. Are you interested in serving the homeless? Are you called to a ministry of healing prayer? Are you ready to serve at the altar as a chalice bearer? Each of those ministries (and more) begin when we recognize that Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith that our refuge is found in God alone. So, if you think the church can be a more vibrant, fuller place, come and help us lay another brick upon the sure foundation of our faith. With Christ as the foundation, anything is possible. Amen.