

*Based on Psalm 31:1-4. Seeking safety and solace.*

About a month into my very first congregational ministry, I was called upon to visit a parishioner in the hospital. I will call her Janet. I had been warned that Janet was fading and might not be responsive, but that I should try to reach her as best I could.

Try I did! I asked about her family, I asked about her garden, I asked about her service to the church. I asked and I asked and I asked, to no avail. Janet simply stared back, eyes blinking very little. Truly, it seemed to me, she dwelt on a different plane of existence altogether.

Finally, I gave up and prepared to leave. In one final fleeting attempt at pastoral blessing, I blurted out, *God be with you, Janet*. To which she responded - finally, after all that, - *And also with you*.

I sat back down while Janet opened up. Story after story of her family and her garden and her service to the church gushed out, all of which had been pent up inside her just waiting for a rock of refuge to receive it. Her nurses called it a miracle. The woman whose conscious existence seemed almost comatose had come back to life, even if just for a few moments late one afternoon.

Truly God is with you, Janet. Your refuge and your strength. Your rock and your fortress. And, yes, never forget, God is also with me.

This is what we do for one another in the church, in our liturgical life, in our so-called rote prayers and responses that may seem sterile, archaic, *boring*, as our teenagers say. No matter. Ritual theorists and brain scientists alike remind us that what are doing for one another in our liturgy is mapping a series of neuropathways from our neocortex to our lizard brain with connections that can be tapped when primary methods of communication seem to fail, as they did with Janet.

This pouring of water and wine, this breaking of bread, lighting candles, this anointing and blessing with oil and candles has little to do with indoctrination into religious dogma as a belief system. We are, in the very best sense, right here right now *washing our brains* with symbol and ceremony that can strengthen and comfort and even heal us from real or perceived harm.

That harm can come upon us at any moment, the Psalmist says, like a net in the forest that is hidden for me and can swoop me out of existence at any time.

Don't we know that here at SPC, with the sudden death of Gene Bayer last night and the sudden death of Jim Stovall the week before, and the sudden death of Jack Young last month, not to mention the sudden diagnosis of brain cancer for Joel Blunk, which is a particularly difficult blow for our youth, who experienced Joel's contemplative leadership on their retreat last fall.

Life can turn on a dime.

The Psalmist knows that, God knows that, some very brilliant ancient liturgist whose responsive readings we still use in worship knew that. What we are doing right here right now is so much more than a performance of music or a recitation of poetry or a rousing proclamation that can be marketed as a book. These moments together that we create and re-create in our worship and spiritual life do indeed become a rock of refuge for us in those dime-turning times when it seems we have no safe harbor. What we are doing right now is cultivating ritual stones that will *save our spirits* in our moments of deepest distress.

This I also witnessed last night, as Yvonne Fisher joined Gene Bayer's two grown sons and a daughter-in-law in processing the shock and horror of a life snuffed out, it seems way too soon. Two young men, who grew up in this church, as their father lay dying, found the grace to speak aloud what we recite every Sunday: *In life and in death we belong to God.*

And it was TRUE!