

*Based on Psalm 71:1-6. The Psalmist Finds Refuge in God*

Saturday, February 1, 2025. *We had a fire today. People worry so much about fire.*

So begins the journal entry of 15 year old Lauren Olamina in *Parable of the Sower*, a 1993 speculative fiction novel by Octavia Butler.

As she wrote this book thirty years ago, Octavia Butler imagined what might happen in the mid 2020s if we did not address the core challenges of that time.

The answer sounds oddly familiar: fires, violence, racism, addiction, climate change, social inequality, and an authoritarian government.

All coming too true today.

If we are not afraid, we are not paying attention. Which is great! Stay there. But if we are paying attention, we are right to be afraid. And it is natural to be shaken in that fear.

Our immediate - lizard brain - response to such threats to our safety and our sanity becomes the classic fight, flight, or freeze. All of which is human and in many ways beyond our capacity to control, at least at first.

Over time, however, an alternative emerges, expressed by the Psalmist and practiced by spiritually motivated activists throughout the ages: *taking refuge*.

We may be familiar with this phrase from the Buddhist tradition. Initiates in that tradition are trained to take refuge in the Buddha (or, The Teacher) and to take refuge in the Dharma (or, The Teaching) and to take refuge in the Sangha (or, The Community that has organized itself around the Teacher and Teaching).

In our own way, although it looks different in practice, we, too, take refuge in a Teacher and in a Teaching and in a Community that has organized itself around that Teacher and Teaching.

Today, The Teaching is described to us through an aging musician, harassed for a long time by real or perceived enemies, composing a hymn in the time of the prophet Jeremiah, in the last days before the fall of the Kingdom of Judah, as his culture crumbles around him, his body begins to fail him, and his sense of trust in the world around him is fading.

Through his gift of hymnody, the psalmist is training us to take our ultimate refuge in a God of liberation and rescue, of safety and stability.

The psalmist promises us this refuge will be faithful.

Indeed, psalmist reminds us that this refuge has already been faithful.

The language is not clear to us in any English translation, but the Hebrew describes God as an experienced and competent midwife who is guiding the psalmist through a difficult and even life-threatening re-birth in the midst of the threat.

According to the scholarship of commentator Samuel Terrien, one way to translate the psalmist's refrain is to say, *You did not leave me stuck inside the birth canal at the time of my birth.*

And so I trust you not to leave me stuck inside this birth canal of my new creation, the Psalmist insists.

We are invited to insist the same. To gather in this sanctuary and breathe. To call out to God for deliverance and strength. For courage and encouragement. To collapse at the table and be satisfied as with a rich feast. To place ourselves in the hands of a God who has always figured out a way to make a way out what seems like no way, as we are being birthed into a new creation. This is what it means for us to take refuge.

Jesus, our Teacher, takes refuge throughout his ministry.

Regularly departing to the mountains or the desert to rest, to pray, to recover his sense of strength and purpose before he, like us, returns to confront the threat with non-violent radical love.

Refuge in this way - for Jesus and for us - is not about fighting or fleeing or freezing but rather about firming up our foundation. Refuge in this way - for Jesus and for us - is about remembering who we really are and to whom we really belong in safety and trust and strength. Refuge in this way - for Jesus and for us - is, yes, about a brief moment of escape from the threat, but it is emphatically not *escapISM*.

Refuge in this way - for Jesus and for us - acknowledges the threat is still there while at the same time trusting a power greater than the threat to ultimately prevail, to birth us all into a new creation.

Today we take refuge in our praying and in our singing. Today we take refuge in our speaking and in our listening. And today we take refuge at the table, where all may find a gracious welcome.

When we share the meal together, we remember that God grants us safety, protection, shelter, support, nurture, and caring. And we make a promise that we will offer those things to others.

Because refuge in this way - for Jesus and for us - is about *holding each other's eyes* in the light of the divine gaze and finding beauty there.

Because refuge in this way - for Jesus and for us - is about *hearing each other breathe* in the echo of divine speech, and *knowing it's the sound of the ocean inside us.*

Because refuge in this way - for Jesus and for us - is about saying, in the words of our poet: *I do not know what you carry, but in this moment I will help you carry it. ... Everything depends on us treating each other well.*

This is what it means to take refuge in our Teacher and in our Teaching and in our Community.