

**Children's Talk & Sermon for
Sunday, 10 January 2021**

Children's Talk: Cities of Refuge

- Imagine that you're playing with a tennis ball, throwing it against a wall and catching it.
 - And you've got an older brother or older cousin or someone whose doing something nearby to you.
 - And then, one of the times you throw the ball especially hard, and it bounces in such a way that it hits your brother hard on the side of his head.
 - He looks up at you and is really angry and he starts coming towards you.
 - What do you do?
 - You might have some good ideas about what you should do but I would guess that what you might do first is run away.
 - And where would you run to?
 - You would probably try to find the nearest adult—your mom or dad or uncle or aunt or someone.
 - Why?
 - So that you would be protected while you figured out what happened.
- The children of Israel had a similar system for adults.
- Joshua 20:1-6 (NKJV, modified)
 - ¹ Jehovah also spoke to Joshua, saying, ² “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, ³ that the slayer who kills a person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there; and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood. ⁴ And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city as one of them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them. ⁵ Then if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not deliver the slayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbour unintentionally, but did not hate him beforehand. ⁶ And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the slayer may return and come to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled.’ ”
- They had cities of refuge which were kind of like den when you're playing tag.
 - If people could get there, they would be safe.
- They were for when one person accidentally killed someone else.
 - One example is if two people go into the woods to chop wood and the axe head flies off the handle of the axe and kills the other person (Exodus 19:4-7).
 - That's very different from one person killing another person *on purpose*.
- But the friends and family of the person who was killed accidentally by the axe head might want to get revenge and so the person with the axe could run away to one of these cities of refuge.
 - And the people in the city of refuge would keep that person safe.
 - Until there was a chance to hear the full story.
 - The elders, the old wise people would hear from everyone involved what had happened and then they would make a judgment about what should happen.

- If they decided that the person who had run away had killed the other person on purpose, then that person would face punishment.
 - But, if they decided that the person who had run away was innocent and it was an accident, then they would keep them safe from anyone who wanted to kill them.
- So the cities of refuge provided the chance to slow things down, not jump to punishment and instead hear the full story before deciding what should happen.
- That's the same reason why you would run to a parent if you accidentally hurt your older brother or cousin: so that you could be safe while you had a chance to explain exactly what happened.
- This is useful to see because it shows that even adults need these kinds of systems.
- Sometimes we have big emotions and want to get back at people or other people want to get back at us.
- Sometimes the right thing to do is to run away.
 - Run away if someone wants to hurt you.
 - Run away if *you* want to hurt someone else.
 - Allow someone else to run away if they've hurt you and are worried about what you might do back to them.
 - We all have times when we need to slow things down, let our big feelings come down a bit, and get help from other people in sorting out what to do.
- With more lockdown restrictions again and more people feeling stressed about things can easily lead to people getting angry at each other.
- So remember the cities of refuge.
 - Maybe ask your parents to help you figure out a good spot for you to run away to if you're feeling overwhelmed or scared.
 - And remember that, whatever happens, the Lord can help you figure out what to do.
- *Amen.*

Take Refuge in the Lord

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith
10 January 2021

Intro

- One of the mornings this week when I was reading the Word, a word stuck out to me on the page—refuge.
 - Refuge—a place of shelter, protection, and safety.
 - I think it stuck out to me because it felt like what many of us are longing for—a place of safety where the virus can't reach us or our loved ones, a place of safety from the political and social turmoil of the world.

- You might know that there are many beautiful passages in the Word about taking refuge in the Lord.
 - Some of you might remember an old hymn that's based on Psalm 46 that goes like this:
 - God is our strength and refuge,
our present help in trouble,
and we therefore will not fear,
though the earth should change!
Though mountains shake and tremble,
though swirling waters are raging,
God the Lord of hosts is with us evermore!

- These sorts of scriptures and songs fill me up, strengthen me.
 - And so I want to read you some of those scriptures today to fill you up and strengthen you for whatever you're facing.
 - And I also want to talk a bit more about what it means to take refuge in the Lord.
 - It's a nice idea but what does it really mean in practical terms?

- We're going to talk about it in two parts:
 - 1) getting to safety
 - 2) and then going back into the world.

Three Stages of Recovery

- As an aside, I wanted to mention that this way of looking the topic was inspired, in part, by a very thought-provoking book that I'm slowly making my way through called *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman.
 - In that book Herman identifies three states of recovery from trauma: she writes,
 - Recovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life. (p.155)

- Herman also immediately makes it clear that we shouldn't hold a framework like this too rigidly; she writes,
 - Like any abstract concept, these stages of recovery are a convenient fiction, not to be taken too literally. They are an attempt to impose simplicity and order upon

a process that is inherently turbulent and complex. But the same basic concept of recovery stages has emerged repeatedly.... (p.155)

- I think this is a really important point to keep in mind when we talk about taking refuge in the Lord or doing any spiritual process.
 - It's not going to be as neat or by the book as a sermon can make it sound.
- If you want to learn more about the nuances and complexity of recovery from trauma, I highly recommend Herman's book.
 - But I do think that it's valuable to see that, even for severely traumatised people, the the first stage of the process is establishment of safety and the eventual goal is to work towards some version of reconnection with ordinary life.

Getting to Safety

- Let's talk about getting to safety.
- This is what we were talking about in the children's talk.
 - Running away so that you can hide behind your parent's legs.
- We're going to be focusing on getting to a place of *spiritual* safety but as we do that I want us to also keep in our hearts people around the world, in our neighbourhoods, and maybe even watching this service who do not have physical or emotional safety—people who don't have an obvious or easy place to run and feel safe and cared for.
- Let's talk about running away.
- Running away can get a bad reputation, like it's the weak, cowardly thing to do.
 - There are times when we need to bravely go meet our problems—and we'll talk about that in the second section of this sermon—but there are definitely times when the better course of action is to retreat rather than advance.
- It reminds me of this passage about repentance from *True Christianity* that's talking about how repenting of our evils is what really starts our spiritual lives.
 - *True Christianity* §510
 - The church takes hold in us when we are regenerated, and we are all regenerated when we abstain from things that are evil and sinful and run away from them as we would run if we saw hordes of hellish spirits pursuing us with flaming torches, intending to attack us and throw us onto a bonfire.
 - If you want to be a spiritual person, learn when to run away.
 - Don't think that you're going to be able to do the right thing and not do the wrong just by your sheer willpower.
- The mighty King David who faced and defeated Goliath with just his sling also did a lot of running away when King Saul was trying to kill him.
 - And we have many beautiful psalms written by David about taking refuge in the Lord.
- Some of them even record the specific time when David wrote them.
 - For example, Psalm 57 is recorded as "A Michtam of David when he fled from Saul into the cave."
 - Here's a little bit of that psalm.

- Psalm 57:1-3 (NKJV)

- 1 Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me!
For my soul trusts in You;
And in the shadow of Your wings I will make my refuge,
Until these calamities have passed by.
- 2 I will cry out to God Most High,
To God who performs all things for me.
- 3 He shall send from heaven and save me;
He reproaches the one who would swallow me up.
Selah

- We're going to read a couple of excerpts from these psalms and see what we can learn from them.
 - One thing that's useful in this psalm we've just read is to imagine David in the cave, hiding from Saul, and choosing that time to compose a psalm to the Lord.
 - When we're feeling overwhelmed it's too easy to retreat into our phones or some other form of entertainment or escapism.
 - Can we instead learn to pray in those times?
- Try writing a letter or poem to the Lord, asking Him to help you, asking Him to help you trust in Him.
 - Or if that's too much, read some of the psalms.
 - Or try to remember some familiar passages from the Lord's Word, maybe recitations you learned years ago.
 - Or sing some of your favourite church songs.
- The psalm says "He shall send from heaven and save me; He reproaches the one who would swallow me up."
 - There is real power in the literal sense of the Word to connect us with angels in heaven and with the Lord and with their power to push the evil spirits away from us.
- Let's read some more of this psalm:
 - Psalm 57:3-7 (NKJV)
 - 3 God shall send forth His mercy and His truth.
 - 4 My soul is among lions;
I lie among the sons of men
Who are set on fire,
Whose teeth are spears and arrows,
And their tongue a sharp sword.
 - 6 They have prepared a net for my steps;
My soul is bowed down;
They have dug a pit before me;
Into the midst of it they themselves have fallen.
Selah
 - 7 My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and give praise.
- How will the Lord help us and provide us with spiritual refuge? By sending forth His mercy and His truth.
 - We need both.

- We need to remember how much He loves us, understands us, and cares about us and how He is willing to work with us and help us no matter what we've done.
 - And we need His truth to bring light and boundaries and direction.
- And a big way that the Lord sends out His mercy and His truth and a big way that we can take refuge in the Lord is through other people.
 - A good conversation with even just one other person can make a big difference in us feeling a little bit less alone in this world, a little bit more seen, a little bit more safe.
 - A church community can be a refuge in a difficult world.
 - I'm very sad that we haven't been able to get together in person with each other to hear and support each other for almost a year now.
 - Even if you're sick of video calls and things through screens, reach out to someone in your spiritual community today.
 - For their sake; for your sake—make a connection.
 - I was in a Zoom meeting yesterday afternoon and it filled me up.
 - I found spiritual community there.
 - I found refuge in the Lord there.
 - I want the same thing for you.
- With the help of the Lord's mercy and truth we can sometimes see nets and pits that the hells have set up to try to trap us.
 - When we are scared and upset it's easy to get into a downward spiral of imagining worse and worse things.
 - The Lord can help us to avoid that.
 - When we're scared and upset we can tend to be very reactive and take it out on the people around us.
 - The Lord can help us to acknowledge how we're feeling and choose to respond more consciously.
 - When we're desperate or overwhelmed we can think that the answer is to go against our principles.
 - Isaiah talks about people who take refuge in lies.
 - Isaiah 28:14-15 (NKJV, modified)
 - ¹⁴ Therefore hear the word of Jehovah, you scornful men,
Who rule this people who are in Jerusalem,
 - ¹⁵ Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death,
And with hell we have made a vision.
When the overflowing scourge passes through,
It will not come to us,
For we have made lies our refuge,
And under falsehood we have hidden ourselves."
 - Lying might seem like it's working in the short-term but in the long-term it's not going to provide a reliable refuge.
 - Isaiah says this a little bit later in the same chapter:
 - Isaiah 28:17 (NKJV)
 - ¹⁷ The hail will sweep away the refuge of lies,
And the waters will overflow the hiding place.

- Difficult circumstances can make it seem like our only option for some safety is to compromise on our principles and “do what we have to do” to be safe, even if it means breaking the commandments or going against our conscience but those are always traps from hell.
 - If we take refuge in the Lord as our first resort and as our last resort, He can help us to avoid those traps.
 - As it says in Proverbs,
 - Proverbs 14:26
 - ²⁶ In the fear of Jehovah there is strong confidence,
And His children will have a place of refuge.
- To get more of a feel for how we might take refuge in the Lord I want to go back to the last line that we read from Psalm 57.
- It said, “My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and give praise.”
 - Isn’t that beautiful?
 - Other translations say, “My heart is prepared, O God, my heart is prepared.”
 - And my heart is “fixed”, “unwavering”, “confident”.
 - The repetition in it makes it feel like something we might repeat to ourselves as we take refuge in the Lord.
 - “My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and give praise.”
 - “My heart is prepared, O God, my heart is prepared; I will sing and give praise.”
 - In the process of saying those words to the Lord they can become true for us—our hearts can settle and become steadfast and prepared.
- Can we take the time to find that place of safety and rest and refuge in the Lord?
 - Can we come to Him in whatever state we are and allow Him to bring us towards peace and trust?
- Part of what can bring us that sense of peace is by taking the time to remember what the Lord teaches.
 - Teachings about the Lord’s Divine Providence and how He’s caring for us at every possible moment and leading us towards a good end, even when it doesn’t seem like it.
 - We know those things but we need to take the time to bring them to mind, to sit with them long enough for us to actually believe that they’re true again.
- Here’s one teaching about the Lord’s Divine Providence from the book *Secrets of Heaven* and I’ve found it to be really powerful in these last bunch of months.
- It’s a story that Emanuel Swedenborg tells about an experience he had in the spiritual world but I think it also applies to how the Lord works in the natural world too.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §5396
 - There was a large crowd of spirits around me, which sounded like a disorderly lot going by. They were all grumbling, declaring that everything was now being destroyed; for no unity at all was apparent among those who constituted that crowd of spirits, which made them fear destruction. They also imagined that they faced total destruction.... But I detected in the midst of them a soft, sweet angelic sound, which was a wholly well-ordered one.

Angelic choirs were present in the middle of them, while the actual crowd of spirits in all their disorder were on the outside. That angelic stream of sound lasted for a long time, and I was told that it served to represent the way in which the Lord regulates confused and disordered outward elements from a peaceful centre within them; He brings order into the disordered most outlying elements by withholding each one from the error peculiar to it.

- Isn't that just beautiful?
 - It can feel like there's no unity, no connection, everything is going to be destroyed and yet somewhere in the middle of it all is the Lord and the angels, providing a peaceful centre and gradually, individually bringing order to each of the people.
 - And I think it's also a picture of what the Lord can do in each of us.
 - We can have a lot of disorderly, grumbling, fearful things going on around and in the outer parts of our lives and minds.
 - But we can also invite the Lord into our hearts to provide that peaceful centre from which order can gradually be restored.

Going Back into the World

- Now let's talk about the process of going back into the world to face whatever we need to face.
- The more safety and connection we experience when we retreat, the more we will be able to go out with confidence.
 - Like a toddler who feels secure in their relationship with their parent who wanders further and further away from their parent in a park.
 - It can be rather stressful as the parent and you can sometimes wish that they felt a little bit more fear but ultimately it's a good thing if children feel like they can move out into the world and it comes from feeling safe and connected.
- And we need to move out into the world because a place of safety can become a prison.
 - Like the stories in the Bible of times when the Children of Israel were besieged by an enemy.
 - Yes, it's good that they could retreat to their walled cities as a place of refuge.
 - But then they were trapped there, with no ability to go in and out.
 - And I don't know about you, but in our household, with this increased lockdown, we are definitely feeling the need to get out of our place of refuge once in a while.
- And, of course, the Lord can and will also help us with going back into the world.
- And a big part of how He does that is by preparing us to face whatever we're facing.
- Listen to this amazing passage from Ephesians.
- We don't often read from the epistles but there is some great stuff in them about how to live the life of a Christian.
 - Ephesians 6:10-18 (NKJV)
 - ¹⁰ Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up

the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

- ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; ¹⁶ above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. ¹⁷ And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; ¹⁸ praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication....

- Isn't that such a perfect description of being prepared and protected by the Lord?
- It also reminds me of this beautiful passage about how a good, charitable soldier acts.
 - *Doctrine of Charity* §166
 - Before the battle he raises his mind to the Lord, and commits his life into His hand; and after he has done this, he lets his mind down from its elevation into the body and becomes brave; the thought of the Lord—which he is then unconscious of remaining still in his mind, above his bravery. And then if he dies, he dies in the Lord; if he lives, he lives in the Lord.
- Even if we're not heading into literal battle, we can still take the time to pray to the Lord and commit our life to him and then come down into our body and become brave to do what we need to do.
 - That might be the bravery to have a difficult conversation with a family member or friend that we know we need to have but we don't know how it will go.
 - Or it might be the bravery to show up to do your job on Monday morning, even if you might be doing it remotely from home and you don't really know how you're going to do your job, you're still showing up to try to figure it out.

Conclusion

- I wish that I could offer you and your loved ones guaranteed physical safety, a refuge where no virus or turmoil could reach you or harm you.
 - Or I wish that I could tell you how to pray in just the right way so that the Lord would guarantee your physical safety.
- But I can't do either of those things and it's actually definitely a good thing that I can't.
- Instead the Lord offers you a *spiritual* refuge—protection when you need to retreat and protection when you need to move forward.
 - And when we are overwhelmed with natural world concerns, being offered a spiritual refuge can seem ultimately unhelpful or missing the point.
 - But I hope that you'll take the time to try taking refuge in the Lord anyway—even if it doesn't seem like it will help.
 - Because it will help.
 - Psalm 46:1-2 (NKJV)
 - ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
 - ² Therefore we will not fear,
Even though the earth be removed....
- Amen.