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In You, O Lord, I Seek Refuge  
A Sermon for St. Peter's Parish Church  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A  
May 10, 2020

***Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16***

***In te, Domine, speravi***

*1 In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge;  
let me never be put to shame; \*  
deliver me in your righteousness.*

*2 Incline your ear to me; \*  
make haste to deliver me.*

*3 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.*

*4 Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for me, \*  
for you are my tower of strength.*

*5 Into your hands I commend my spirit, \*  
for you have redeemed me,  
O LORD, O God of truth.*

*15 My times are in your hand; \*  
rescue me from the hand of my enemies,  
and from those who persecute me.*

*16 Make your face to shine upon your servant, \*  
and in your loving-kindness save me."*

***John 14:1-14***

*Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."*

*Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."*

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(In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)

Today's gospel reading begins two Sundays of preparation. In 11 days, we'll celebrate the Feast of Ascension, when Christ is taken up to heaven. This week and next, the church reads through what we call Jesus' Farewell Discourse. Time stands still for a moment as Jesus prepares his disciples for his death. It is the last supper. Judas Iscariot has left the building. Jesus will be arrested. Peter will deny his dear friend not just once but three times. The crucifixion is hours away. The disciples will cower in an upper room in fear for their lives.

As Jesus anticipates grief and death, he comforts them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." He offers them solace. In the face of grief and loss, Jesus offers his followers love. That love and the peace of Christ will carry them through the most difficult times they've ever faced.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus tells his disciples he's going ahead of them, to prepare a place for them to take refuge, a dwelling place. A place of peace. These days, we long for this sense of peace and safety. As we watch the news, we search for information and understanding that will give us a sense of control over our current situation. We buy toilet paper, Clorox wipes, and hand sanitizer in hope that it will help prevent us or our loved ones from getting sick. We wear masks not to keep ourselves from getting sick, but as acts of loving-kindness for our neighbors. Wearing a mask is a choice made in obedience to Christ's greatest commandment – Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, and Love your neighbor as yourself. We witness to Christ through these actions in the world.

Right now the whole world is experiencing fear, grief and loss. Just as the disciples had to face Jesus' death, we face death every day, in statistics and rankings and news about the virus. We've taken refuge in our homes to "flatten the curve" and help our doctors, nurses, and health care workers weather the storm of illness and death. In all these things, we are also hoping to create a sense of physical safety. This isn't what Jesus offers before he dies.

Instead, Jesus offers them solace for their hearts, balm for their wounded spirits. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Abide in me. I am in the father and the father is in me. I have been with you all this time. Jesus did not offer his disciples a sense of physical security. He knew that the disciples wouldn't be able to control what happened to him, or to control what would happen to themselves after his death. He knew that ultimately, in life and in death, he belonged to God. Jesus offered something more important than control and physical safety, he offered spiritual confidence and peace. True peace doesn't come from our attempts to protect ourselves, or from hope in our earthly leaders. Jesus pointed us to the peace that comes from our knowledge of the love God has for us. A love so deep and so broad that God would come among us in the face of Jesus, to abide with us.

Our psalm today is the source of Jesus' last words on the cross, as reported by Luke, "Into your hand I commend my Spirit." This is where Jesus took his comfort. He knew that his life, and all our lives, are in God's hand. He recounted for us the prayer of this psalm as he hung from the hard wood of the cross. Psalm 31 is a song of lament. Its descriptions of the psalmist's

troubles and petitions to God alternate with declarations of trust in God's nature as an abiding and loving presence.

The peace that springs from an untroubled heart comes from understanding that singing God's song, our Easter song, happens in the middle of life's grief, and from the midst of death. That is the place from which the psalmist sings his song. I trust in you O Lord. My times are in your hand.

Years ago, the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr wrote that the Church should close all programs for a year and simply teach people to pray. He was being facetious, but as he says now, this might be just such an opportunity. Jesus taught his *disciples* to pray what we now call The Lord's Prayer. The psalms were *Jesus'* prayers, and today's is the last prayer he uttered. I invite you to join me in learning to pray it with our hearts. Search out the words of comfort and love in the midst of trouble and grief.

In you, O Lord, we seek refuge. Do not let us be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver us. We are not ashamed of our faith in you, for we know you WILL save us. Our God is a God of saving grace.

Incline your ear to us; rescue us speedily. Be a rock of refuge for us, a strong fortress to save us. Do you hear the voice of our lament? Turn towards us in our need. The only place strong enough to keep us safe is the place you have prepared for us to abide in. When we see Jesus, we see you. As we strive to be like Jesus, help us to abide in his love for all people. Help us to see those who are particularly vulnerable to the cruelties of this virus. Help us to love you in such a way that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor's body, but help and support our neighbor in every physical need.

You are indeed our rock and our fortress; for your name's sake lead us and guide us. As you led your people Israel out of their bondage in Egypt, lead us and guide us out of our bondage to sin and death. Help us in this time of plague and death to feel the peace of your presence and your son's love for all things. Help us to face these times not by searching for control, but by remembering that our lives rest in your hand.

Take us out of the net that is hidden for us, for you are our refuge. We often do not see the traps that we become stuck in, the idols we have crafted for ourselves. Free us from the traps of self-reliance and our belief that we control our own lives. Save us from the smallness of thinking that we provide our own refuge from the world. Our true refuge is in your love, and in the places that you have prepared for us.

Into your hand, we commit our spirits; you have redeemed us, O Lord, faithful God. Our times are in your hand, deliver us from the hand of our enemies. Deliver us from the belief in our own independence, and our lack of care for one another. Help us to abide in Christ, as he abides in you. Help us to embody his love and to realize that we are all interconnected. Save us from ourselves and our hardness of heart. Deliver us from pestilence and plague, from sin and death. Help us to remember that because of the gift of your Son's abiding presence with us, death, while not utterly vanquished, never has the last word. In the end, love abides.

Let your face shine upon your servants. Save us in your steadfast love. Let not our hearts be troubled.

Amen.