

Christ the Solid Rock  
Psalm 61  
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## I

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

To the best of my recollection, that is the very first prayer I learned to pray. I couldn't have been more than three or four years old, but those were the words I prayed at bedtime. I didn't really understand them, but I dutifully recited them for years.

Oh, the Lord's been good to me, and so I thank the Lord, for the sun and the rain and the appleseed, the Lord's been good to me. Amen.

I learned that mealtime prayer at summer camp when I was maybe nine or ten. And then I learned the short version – rubadub dub, thanks for the grub, yay God.

## II

What about you? Who taught you how to pray? What prayers did you learn to say, and at what age?

It strikes me that every faith tradition has a collection of prayers that gets passed down from one generation to another. These are prayers and litanies that we recite at mealtimes and at bedtimes, mostly, and all of that is fine and good.

## III

But in our first reading this morning from Luke's gospel, there's something that grabbed my attention. By the eleventh chapter of Luke, the disciples have been with Jesus for quite awhile now. They've seen their share of miracles and healings, they've heard their share of parables and teachings. Clearly, they've been with Jesus long enough to observe that there's something qualitatively different about him, something that makes him different from every person they've ever known.

And so they come to Jesus with an odd request. They say, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Now, ostensibly, the disciples were all full grown men who had been raised as faithful Jews. They had grown up reciting all the appropriate prayers and mealtimes and bedtimes, as had generations of people of faith before them.

But they must have seen something different in their rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth. They must have observed him at prayer, and noticed a different kind of

connection to the divine, a different sense of his spirit. And so they said, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

And Jesus obliged them by teaching them what we have come to know as the Lord’s Prayer. And to this very day, people of faith around the world recite the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples.

But here’s the thing. What happens when the words won’t come? What happens when the mealtime prayers and the bedtime prayers and even the Lord’s prayer just seem like going through the motions?

Because sometimes, life is just too much. Sometimes, we’re just so completely overwhelmed by all that’s going on in the world, the words just won’t come, and the old standbys just won’t do.

I think that’s exactly what was happening to our ancestor in faith who wrote the words to Psalm 61. I think our ancestor was just completely overwhelmed, completely out of gas, so much so that the words just would not come.

This summer, we’ve been preaching our way through the Book of Psalms, which, as you’ll recall, isn’t a book at all in the classic sense, but rather a collection, and anthology of songs and prayers and poems that was collected over a long period of time and then brought together into what we have come to know as the Psalter. It’s been said that every human emotion can be found expressed somewhere in the 150 psalms, and in the psalm before us today, our ancestor if faith is feeling overwhelmed. So listen now for a Word from God from Psalm 61.

*Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I; for you are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy. Let me abide in your tent forever, find refuge under the shelter of your wings.*

*For you, O God, have heard my vows; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name. Prolong the life of the king; may his years endure to all generations! May he be enthroned forever before God; appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him! So I will always sing praises to your name, as I pay my vows day after day.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

#### IV

I suspect, my friend, that your heart might be faint this morning, for any number of reasons. If you’re a student or a teacher or a parent or have any connection at all to a learning institution, thinking about the start of the fall term is simply overwhelming in so many ways this year.

If you're in a position of leadership, whether you lead in business, in government, in a faith community, or even in a family, I imagine that your heart is faint or even overwhelmed this day.

Maybe your heart is overwhelmed for reasons that have nothing to do with a global pandemic, systemic racism, and civil unrest across the nation. Maybe your heart is feeling faint for reasons that you can't even really form into words right now.

You're not alone, my friend, and you are not the first child of God to ever feel this way.

The psalmist, your ancestor in faith, once prayed, O Lord, hear my cry, listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I will call out to you when my heart is overwhelmed. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

Last week, I had the chance to hike to the summit of Greybeard Mountain, which sits more than a mile high overlooking the town of Montreat, North Carolina. When I arrived at the summit, I was literally standing upon the highest rock in the Montreat Valley. For a few moments, I took in the view, and then the clouds began to roll in, and soon, I couldn't see more than a few dozen feet. So far removed from any other sign of civilization, I did have for a moment the feeling of standing at the edge of the earth.

There was something deeply comforting to me in that moment, knowing that I was standing on solid rock, a rock that had been there long before I was, and will be there long after I am gone. As the clouds rolled in and surrounded me, I had a sense that amid all of the chaos and uncertainty that has marked my life in recent days, I was standing on firm footing.

But as I began to make my descent, I began to notice something. The mountain was not as stable as I thought it was. Rocks that had been dry and firm on the way up were now wet and slippery. The creek crossings were a bit more treacherous on the way down than they had been on the way up. Yes, the mountain was there far before I arrived, and will be there long after I am gone, but even the mountain is not permanent.

Maybe it was the altitude or fatigue, but on the way down, I began to think about quantum physics, which, in its simplest terms, suggests that everything in the universe is always moving and changing, even when you think it's standing still, including old, old mountains.

The psalmist is feeling overwhelmed. Everything is swirling and changing in the psalmist's life, so the psalmist prays to be led to a high rock. With sighs too deep for words, the psalmist prays for something solid, something secure, to which the psalmist can cling in the storm.

In my heart of hearts, my friend, I believe in quantum physics. But I also believe that there really is a fixed point in the universe, a fixed point around which everything seen and unseen revolves. That fixed point, that rock, that anchor point that holds all things together, is Jesus. As the Scripture says, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. As the Scripture says, though the mountains should tumble into the sea, the Word of the Lord will stand forever.

The rock upon which you can stand, the anchor point of your life, my friend, can't be found in the mountains, or in your own strength and ingenuity, or in any other place. The solid rock is in Jesus of Nazareth, who knows what it's like to be you – to be overwhelmed, to struggle to find the words of prayer, to pray with sighs too deep for words, to cry out in the midst of the storm. The solid rock is in Jesus of Nazareth, who lived for you, who was betrayed and crucified for you, who was raised again for you, who reigns in power for you, and even now, even when your heart is faint, prays for you.

## V

While I was in the mountains, I spent some time thinking and praying about us, about our life together as the First Presbyterian Church of Athens. And I thought about all of the amazing things we have to offer to Athens and the world – all of the programs, all of the resources, all of the ways in which we work to pass on the traditions of our faith to the next generation.

But what we really have to offer the world isn't a program, or a building, or a curriculum or a resource. What we really have to offer Athens and the world is the truth that among all of the chaos of this world, among all of the overwhelming things happening in our nation, our state, and our city, there is a fixed point in the created order of things that does not change.

His name is Jesus, which means he will save his people.

His name is Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

He is the king who will rule the nations with justice and equity, who decrees that we shall lift up the poor and the outcast, that we shall comfort the brokenhearted and the downtrodden. He is the king whose kingdom has no end.

O God, hear our cries, listen to our prayers. From the ends of the earth, we will call out to you, when our hearts are overwhelmed.

Help us lead people to the rock that is higher than us.

Amen.