

NO ROCK LIKE OUR GOD – November 15, 2015

Scripture: 1 Samuel 2:1-8 (2)

Unison: The Covenant of North Church (printed on bulletin cover)

Hymns: 1) #8 Praise to the Living God 2) #10 Rock of Ages 3) #607 We Would Be Building

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: There is no Holy One like the Lord,

People: There is no rock like our God!

L: The pillars of the earth are the Lord's,

P: On them he has set the world.

All: Let us worship the Lord, our rock, our Holy One!

INVOCATION & LORD'S PRAYER

Our hearts exult in you, O God. You alone are holy, our rock and redeemer. We come before you, trusting in your power to save us and your steadfast love to transform us. Bless us now, as we pray the way Jesus taught us: "Our Father..."

THE SERMON

It's been said (by Walter Rauschenbusch, in the early 20th century), that ministers should preach with the Bible in one hand, and the daily newspaper in the other. That's certainly true today, although now it's a computer, and this is a teaching sermon for you and for me.

"There is no rock like our God!" That was part of Hannah's song of thanksgiving and victory when God answered her prayer to relieve her infertility. On Friday afternoon, I sat down at the computer to develop the outline I'd made for a sermon about how Hannah threw her reliance on God to remove her disgrace. About the times when we cry out to God. About the new and unexpected possibilities that can come when we throw our reliance on God.

But then, while I was working, my news feed blew up. Terrorist attacks—terrible ones—in Paris. In a restaurant. Outside a soccer stadium. At a packed rock concert. Over a hundred dead, slaughtered. On top of news earlier this week of bombs in Beirut and Baghdad. Innocent people doing everyday things, destroyed.

Heartbreaking. Terrifying.

My cry then—and still, honestly—was **Oh God! How could this happen! Why did this happen! Protect your people!**

Then I watched a bunch of news and looked at a whole lot of Facebook posts and checked my twitter feed. I saw people posting the **reminder from Mr. Rogers, when you wonder where is God, look to the people who are helping, that's where you'll find God**. And I do believe that, really I do, but I was not ready to own that then and I am still not completely ready to own that. I was in the grip of something much deeper.

By Saturday morning, yesterday morning, these were my thoughts:

How could human beings do such things to one another?

How could they claim that doing this is serving God?

HOW DARE THEY!!

How afraid does this make me feel? Is anything, anywhere, really safe?

And, what can I possibly preach about all this?

So, let's think together for a little while.

1. **How could human beings do this?** I really do not understand. The rage that allows someone to do horrible acts of violence randomly, against innocent people, not even to

prove a point: just to make everyone afraid. Terrorism. **I do understand how rage can take over the mind**, how it possesses people to the point that they say and do things they don't mean in that flame storm of anger. But I do not understand this, rage as a way of life, rage that brings someone to the place of terror, hatred, disregard for life. **I guess this is what it means to say we are fallen.** To say we are beings created good by God, with the capacity to choose how we act. The exemplary story of Adam and Eve shows how that choosing can so easily go wrong. How in that choosing, we are inclined to be selfish, to want our own way, to make ourselves the judge and the ruler, instead of God. Adam and Eve's oldest son, Cain, committed the first murder in a jealous rage when his brother Abel's offering seemed more pleasing to God. **We are fallen, and one sign of that, as we hear in John 3:19, is: "this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."**

2. That brings me to number two: **How could these terrorists claim that doing this is serving God?** As followers of Jesus, we raise up God's grace, God's forgiving love, ahead of all other qualities of God. In Christ, we discover that God's love is stronger than death, stronger than fear, stronger than violence. So it's always a shock when someone makes a claim about God that justifies violence, killing those who don't share our beliefs, harming rather than helping. Some argue that Allah is not the same as the God known to us in Christ, although Mohammed definitely named Allah as the God of Abraham. Mohammed also respected Jesus as a prophet of Allah—although not the savior, or an embodiment of God, which is a core confession of Christian faith. Certainly Islam follows a very different path, one that holds people responsible for creating the conditions for Allah to work. Christians, on the other hand, know that God has already acted and is always acting and beckons us to work alongside. **I have recently been wrestling with some of this question of violence in God's name** because my one year Bible reading plan is in the book of Ezekiel right now, and oh, my goodness, the prophecies of God's judgment against the people of Jerusalem are cringeworthy! So bloodthirsty. So horrifying. So violent. So un-loving. It's hard to read; hard enough that I was motivated to do some checking on how these words are understood by Jewish readers. The very short answer, which would be an interesting sermon series some day, is that they do not see their scriptures in the same inerrant, God-breathed way that we see ours. They understand the words of the prophets as very much embedded in their times and circumstances—in the case of Ezekiel, invasion and destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon—and they also see these words as written and mediated by humans, with all their biases and their own opinions about what they are seeing. But my point here is, **if you just took a snapshot of Ezekiel, it sounds like God, whom we worship, is violent and harsh. And yet, in Ezekiel and other troubling texts it is always made very clear**

that it is GOD WHO METES OUT THE JUDGEMENT AND THE PUNISHMENT, not humans; Ezekiel has words from God about the price Babylon will pay for invading Jerusalem, alongside the words about how God will not protect the people because they have fallen away. **Acts of violence and mass murder aren't serving God no matter what terrorists anywhere say,** whether it's ISIS, or Sinn Fein in Ireland, or the Inquisition, or the Salem witch trials.

3. Then there's **my own anger at this: HOW DARE THEY!** It feels so much better to rage against the perpetrators than to admit my own sorrow and fear. But, as you can see from where we've already been: **we cannot act in anger. We can act in mercy, and we can also act in correction....but it must be reasoned. It must be put to the Jesus test.** Those first enraged thoughts-- "bomb them off the face of the earth!" or "Get rid of them" or "They and everyone like them are all evil and must be defeated" come from the same kind of angry enraged place as the acts we deplore, a path that responds to violence with violence and is a spiral down into the darkness. **So every time we give in to those inevitable angry thoughts, we are not walking in the path shown to us by Jesus who said: "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."**
(Matthew 5:44)
4. So if anger isn't where I need to rest, then I wonder....**How afraid does this make me feel? Is anything, anywhere, really safe?** It does make me feel afraid, especially when I step out from behind the anger that I use to hide my fear. It brings to mind many other terrible, terrible things. I scoured the news reports...what made them pick Paris? What might make them pick my place in the world? The day of the Boston Marathon bombing, I had no rest until I heard from my daughters who live there. And then I still had no rest in my grief and my fear for the children of others, and for my own safety. **When you read the Bible, it's hard to avoid the realization: no place is safe.** The Jews in Jerusalem thought Assyria and Egypt and Babylon could not harm them because the temple was there and would always be there. But it was not. And it is not still, even after being rebuilt two times. Life is uncertain, always. Life ends in death...always. When we are reminded of this we understand how insecure our footing is when we trust in temporal things: our nations, our institutions, our culture, even our selves. **The only solid rock is our Redeemer...God. The only footing we have is in God. The only true security we have is in God.** This is not to say that we should retreat into a sect, becoming a closed community like the Amish, or that we should not strive to do good works as a nation or as a church! **In fact, knowing that the only true security we can have is in God – and that it is freely given and we always have it – knowing that is what allows us to go into the world, in confidence even when everything looks terrible.** For me, the most powerful thing, among so many powerful things, in the Christmas story is John's affirmation: **the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness**

has not extinguished it. Because the darkness cannot extinguish God. Cannot put out the searchlight beacon of God's love coming to each of our hearts. Cannot blot out the astonishing sacrificial love of God shown to us in the incarnation and the crucifixion of Jesus. Cannot change the mighty proclamation of the resurrection. Cannot take the Holy Spirit out of our hearts.

So how to preach this? Now is the time for Mr. Rogers: look to the helpers. Look to the stories. We feel these things. They are hard. But when we are challenged by horrible hard things, **we have stories in the Bible of God and people, stories that can help us to find answers and then faithfully craft our own responses.** And we have the great and gracious love of God, who is our foundation, our mighty fortress. His truth is marching on. He has lived among us and died and risen to save us, and has sent his Spirit to us to create the Body of Christ, the church, which serves God and cares for the world in love and justice. **God has gathered us to be this church, in this time and in this place, to proclaim this good news: God is our rock and our redeemer, always at work even when we cannot see it, always transforming this fallen world into God's righteous realm.** The witness of Hannah that we heard in our scripture reading is that there are always new and unexpected possibilities that can come when we throw our reliance on God.

Our closing hymn, "We Would Be Building" was written in 1935, another uncertain time, and I invite you now to sing it with your hearts as well as your voices. May it be our prayer, in this time and in all times.

WE WOULD BE BUILDING – words by Paul E. Deitz, 1935 (Sung to hymn tune "Finlandia")

We would be building; temples still undone o'er crumbling walls their crosses scarcely lift,
waiting 'til love can raise the broken stone, and hearts creative bridge the human rift. We
would be building, Architect Divine, reveal the shape of love in your design.

Teach us to build; upon the solid rock we set the dream that hardens into deed, ribbed with
fine steel, both time and change to mock, the unfailing purpose of our noblest creed. Teach us
to build; O Maker, lend us sight to see the towers gleaming in the light.

O keep us building, Savior; may our hands ne'er falter when the dream is in our hearts, when to
our ears there come divine commands and all the pride of sinful will departs. We build with
you, O grant enduring worth until your promised realm shall come on earth.