

“God Our Fortress”

Psalm 71:1-3 & Psalm 46:1-3

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Prayer for Understanding God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid a world of changes, remind us of your steadfast everlasting love that never changes. Help us respond to your gracious promises with gratitude. Amen.

God is our fortress, a state of being with love, safety, and belonging. Whenever we need to be delivered, rescued, or saved, God is our fortress.

As a child, I built fortresses out of blankets and chairs making a cozy place. Darlene, my sister, read me books in the fortresses we created, safe places, where I felt loved.

In my grade school years, my dad made fortresses in the hay mow. My dad stacked the bales in such a way that there was a tunnel to a cavity in the hay bales. My parents knew that after school I needed a place of my own, to be alone, to decompress, and reenergize from the energy draining time of being around people. My parents encouraged me to grab a snack and go to my fortress for around an hour before starting my evening farm chores. My bale fortress had a battery operated lantern, a bale bed, sitting area, and work bench area. The bed and sitting area were covered with saddle blankets mixing the smells of horse and hay. Often, I pulled out a stem of hay placing one end in my mouth, farmers chewing gum and floss in one. Hay tastes like herbal tea. The bales absorbed sound, so it was completely, delightfully silent. The floor and walls were scratchy. The sitting area and bed were invitingly comfortable with the firm hay base and support top, comfort plush saddle blankets. My workbench was a piece of plywood. I stuck tools into the bale walls and hung tools from the twine. I enjoyed taking apart things. Anything that was no longer working I would dissect from an electric motor to a radio, from an electrical panel to a hair dryer. I enjoyed discovering how things worked and how they were constructed. I created. I took parts, scrap wood, and metal and made things. A few of them worked. Most were props for my imagination as I used them to go on grand adventures. In my bale fortress, I felt safe. When school days were challenging, the thought of my safe bale fortress comforted me.

In junior high, I expanded my bale fortress to include a series of tunnels. Sometimes, I invited friends to explore these tunnels and play hide and seek. I almost always won, because I had secret tunnels covered with hay doors that I navigated. My main fortress was accessed by two secret doors, because it was my safe space that only I enjoyed.

Today, I have a portable fortress that I can access anytime and anywhere. It is an aspect of an experiential prayer. I often imagine that I am backpacking with Jesus. We camp along a high-altitude lakeshore. A fire keeps us warm as we enjoy the sweetness of smores. In the distance, we are serenaded by the sound of water dancing over the rocks as it flows out of the lake. We sit on a fallen tree. The stars are magnificent. The enormity of the night sky reminds me of God being all powerful to create the sprawling cosmos. My concerns, worries, and anxieties fade in the eternal splendor of the grand cosmos. God whispers I love you from the wonder producing beauty surrounding me. Jesus listens, laughs, and cries with me assuring me that I am loved. Of all the places God can be in the cosmos, God chooses to be with me and you and everyone in our soul through the Holy Spirit. God will never abandon nor forsake us. Nothing will ever separate anyone from God's love. In my visual fortress, I am safe, loved, and belong. When I need a fortress, I picture this place where God and I enjoy each other.

I am grateful to have Leslie as my fortress. With Leslie I know I am safe, loved, and belong. She gives me perspective. Leslie calms my fears and inspires me. She knows how to present options to me, that my initial response to change is no, so she plants the seed, gives me time and space to ponder, and then talks to me about our options. Leslie makes me laugh. She brings out my love, joy, and creativity. Leslie sparks my interest in going on adventures. Leslie continually nudges me to go beyond my hermit safety zone to communicate with others. Leslie, my fortress, models compassion, peacemaking, gratitude, thoughtful caring, gracious hospitality, contagious joy, and extravagant love. A walk with Leslie melts away my stress to reveal opportunities. Her hug wraps me in fortress assuring me I am safe, loved, and belong.

The psalmist sings to God: **Psalm 71:3 “Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.”**

How do you experience God as fortress, ways you are certain you are safe, loved, and belong? In the Old Testament when someone experienced God, they made an alter to remind them of that experience of God, of the love, joy, peace, hope, comfort, insight, safety, belonging, and glory they experienced. Often the alter was a stack of rocks, otherwise known as a cairn. Stone cairns mark paths and memorials, fortress places. Cairns give direction, point the way home, and represent safety, hope, and friendship. Cairn's guide one on the right path. The stack of stones also is a form of meditation to remind us to find the balance of life. Cairns are markers in time, which remind us of loving moments. The Yorks have a cairn on the front steps of our house. I have a cairn on my desk here at church with rocks from special locations and occasions and rocks with words inscribed on them. What do you use to mark your fortress moments?

The psalmist sings: **Psalm 71:1-3 NLT** “O Lord, I have come to you for protection; do not let me be disgraced. Save me and rescue me, for you do what is right. Turn your ear to listen to me and set me free. Be my rock of safety where I can always hide. Give the order to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

Legend says that Augustus Toplady was traveling along the gorge in Burrington Combe, England. He was caught in a fierce storm and took shelter in a rock cleft. Afterwards, he wrote the hymn *Rock of Ages* in 1762. This personal hymn uses pronouns I and me focusing on the personal fortress Augustus experienced in the safety of that rock cleft. *Rock of ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee. Cleanse me from guilt and make me pure. Helpless I look to thee for grace. Rock of ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.* Today the rock is marked with a plaque that reads: “Rock of Ages.”

The psalmist sings: **Psalm 46:1-3 NLT** “God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So, we will not fear when earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea. Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge!”

Adventurer Bear Grylls has scaled Mount Everest, navigated giant rapids in Zambia, and survived eating all sorts of items. Bear has shared his experiences and taken others on adventures through several different TV shows. Bear has a mental fortress he uses with the acronym STOP to transform fear into a tool that enables him to stay sharp, perform well, and to have all his senses firing.

S - Stop and step back. We all have those everyday moments of panic – deadlines, difficult conversations, getting out of our social comfort zones, job interviews. Do not give in to the anxiety of the moment. Stop take a deep breathe, center with God.

T - Take a break. It is hard to think clearly when you are in fight-or-flight mode. Take a moment to gain some distance from the situation and get your thinking brain back online. Deep breaths and a quick mindfulness practice are a good place to start.

O – Observe. In high-stress situations, Bear says it is natural to fixate. “You tend to just get super dialed into that one thing. Look at your surroundings. You are going to see escape routes. You are going to see alternatives and options. Who is in your corner? What resources do you have? Make sure you are on alert and taking stock of the full picture.”

P – Plan. You are cool, calm, and you have collected your resources – it is time to move ahead. Create a strategic plan of action – or two! – and keep moving forward.

Bear says, “The essential elements to surviving in any scenario are not knives or gadgets or dehydrated food packets, but the right perspectives. Tools break, technology fails, plans fall through and it always seems to rain when you least want it to. A key quality to survival – and to life – is getting comfortable with uncertainty and learning to adapt. If I had to choose three things to bring on any expedition, I would make them a resourceful spirit, a determined heart, and a courageous attitude – that you are going to walk towards the difficult stuff and do whatever it takes to get out of that.” Bear takes a mental fortress on all his adventures.

The year was 1521. The guest arrived at the castle under an assumed name: Junker Jörg (the Knight George). But this man was no knight. He was a priest. His name was Martin Luther. He was fleeing the authorities who wanted to arrest him after Pope Leo X had excommunicated him for stubbornly holding fast to his Reformation theology. The castle was Wartburg: an imposing fortress. Martin stayed there under the protection of Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, who was sympathetic to his views. Martin remained safe at Wartburg for a year, while conflict raged around him. In that anxious time, Martin translated the New Testament into German, a feat he accomplished in just 10 weeks. Through that experience, Luther came to know firsthand the truth that God is indeed “a mighty fortress” — as he would celebrate a few years later in his famous hymn, based on Psalm 46. In a few minutes we will sing this favorite hymn of the Lutheran tradition, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. Martin was not a popular man during his lifetime, because he challenged the status quo of the church. Those who fight error and corruption within a system are seldom

popular. Martin knew death threats, the outside influence of plague, and the personal agony of losing his own children, yet by the grace of God he was able to keep pointing others to God, our fortress.

The psalmist sings: **Psalm 71: 1-3 MSG “I run for dear life to God, I will never live to regret it. Do what you do so well: get me out of this mess and up on my feet. Put your ear to the ground and listen, give me space for salvation. Be a guest room where I can retreat; you said your door was always open! You are my salvation—my vast, granite fortress.”**

Baptism is a symbolic fortress. The symbol water is to be a reminder that we belong to God, are loved by God and are safe in God’s steadfast, everlasting love. The water is a symbol of God’s grace washing away all that diminishes life. Every tear, hurt, regret, mistake, lack of love is washed away by God’s grace. The water is living water that heals, purifies, nourishes, invigorates, and propels us to abundant life, exuberant joy, and extravagant love. Saint Augustine said that baptism is a visible sign of what scripture proclaims, God’s redeeming grace freely offered to all people. The water is a flowing fortress to remind you that you belong to God’s family, you are safe in God’s care and you will always be loved by God who is the resurrection and the life. Amen