What does it mean to take refuge in God? The Rev. Elizabeth Blunt reminds us God acts like a father, and a mother, and offers refuge at all times, particularly in times of trouble and desperation.

**Sermon Transcript:**

What does it mean to take refuge in God? This word--hasiti--to take refuge shows up everywhere in the Hebrew scriptures, but especially in the Book of Psalms. It's often accompanied by metaphors. The God of Israel is for us, a castle or a stronghold as in Psalm 31 today. God is like the shade under tall trees, the shelter under an eagle's wings. Well, if you're not someone who reads the Psalms very often, let me commend this practice to you this morning, which is admittedly not an original piece of advice.

Praying the Psalms aloud or in silence, alone or in community, has been one of the backbones of religious practice for Jews and Christians for thousands of years. But this book, really this collection of poems or lyrics or prayers, is particularly practical for us in this moment, this point in modern history when desperation and crying aloud no longer seem so extreme and when drama is no longer entertainment.

In the Psalms, we find the very finest expressions of the human soul right across the page from the bleakest, nothing in the range of human emotion is held back, and all of that--good, bad, and ugly--is addressed as an open letter to this God who insisted on maintaining an authentic relationship of love with humanity. All of that honesty is received as faith. Well, it's still Easter, still our great season of joy, so our lectionary has curated the more upbeat parts of Psalm 31 for us this morning. But I wish we could have heard the whole thing. Here's some pertinent stuff from the middle. Have mercy on me, oh Lord, for I am in trouble.

My eye is consumed with sorrow and also my throat and my belly. I have become a reproach to all my enemies and even to my neighbors, a dismay to those of my acquaintance. When they see me in the street, they avoid me. I am forgotten like a dead man out of mind. I am as useless as a broken pot. I think it helps to know that trust in God, which is the theme of Psalm 31, has almost always shared a seesaw with total desperation. I think it helps us, particularly today, to know from what the person writing this psalm was seeking refuge, not in this case from arrows and armies, but from isolation, uselessness, and despair.

To me, a refuge suggests an enclosure. It suggests a place that's protected on all sides from danger and the unknown. A place where even the most self-sufficient can let their guard down and rest, where they can cede control to someone mightier, someone eminently trustworthy who, out of love or duty, will defend and rescue. In these strange days, we've, of course, been mandated to stay inside, to live behind closed doors whenever we can. I can only speak for myself.

I'm grateful for the privilege of being able to do that, but this has not been that kind of a refuge experience for me. If anything, I find myself lately feeling homesick, even if I'm not sure what I mean by home. I've been particularly missing my mom. Hi mom. I don't think that's unrelated. There are, of course, as many different kinds of mothers as there are mothers, and we recognize these days that the gift of
mothering isn't determined by any kind of biology. But for me, and maybe for many, home and mom and refuge are hard to separate. So happy Mother's Day to all of you out there. Happy Mother's Day, mom.

If, though, Mother's Day is complicated for you, know that you are seen and that you're not alone. Lots of those celebrating will also be remembering mothers they've lost today. Many of us will be missing moms we can't hug and we can't cook with, moms whose hands we can't hold this afternoon. As ever, today will be especially hard for those whose mothers failed, for those who weren't able to have the children they dreamed of, and for mothers who have lost children. For those like Ahmaud Abery's mom whose children have been taken from them by hatred and violence.

In the midst of all of the fathers in our liturgy and in our readings, I think we often lose sight of the fact that our scriptures also consistently describe God as a mother, as one who's given birth to a people, who's fed them and carried them and raised them up in the ways of righteousness. Our God, we're told, has longed like a mother hen to gather her brood under her wings. Our God has reared up to strike down enemies like a ferocious mama bear. Our God has known the pain of losing a beloved child. We call Jesus the Good Shepherd and the Great Physician, wise teacher, but we haven't much talked about his mission as motherly. Jesus, who created a new family, who nurtured it, disciplined it, instructed and challenged it, who loves it fiercely and will love it to the end.

Today, our gospel reading asks us to go back to Jesus and the disciples' last moment of respite and refuge. We find them tucked away in the upper room, shielded from all the discord and the threat that were crackling out in the city. Together there, they receive nourishment, food, also words. In the presence of the one who loves them, they rest. Not many days before Jesus was at table when Mary of Bethany washed and anointed his feet. On this night, he takes her place and tends to his disciples in the same way. Then he tells them gently that the time has come for him to leave. Even without seeing their faces, I think we can witness the disciples' response through Jesus's words. They're devastated, they're afraid.

The word for troubled here, do not let your hearts be troubled, is the same one the Gospel used to describe Jesus's own reaction to the death of Lazarus.

Jesus understands their grief because he's felt it, and his response is to offer comfort, surely some of the most comforting words in all of scripture. There's a reason why John 14 is so often the Gospel chosen for rights of burial. Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God. Believe in me. In my father's house, there are many abiding places, many places of refuge, enough for all. This is goodbye, but only for a time, I will return to you and lead you there myself. But for now, I'm going ahead to prepare a place for you.

I know there are lots of sophisticated theological ways to understand that. I know we're probably supposed to understand Jesus as a new pillar of fire leading Israel through the wilderness to the promised land. We should probably imagine Christ passing through the curtain of the holy of holies so that we can follow. But what I really picture when Jesus says he's going to prepare a place for us is pillows being fluffed and rearranged. I picture covers being smoothed and clean towels stacked in a chair. I picture a gracious host applying a critical eye to the comfort, waiting for her guest, and I picture a parent tidying a child's room before bed. Jesus promises faithfulness to his own forever.

He promises to act as a guide and a companion. All that he asks of them in return is a disposition toward trust. He asked that they place a little bit of themselves in his hands. He asked that they preserve their memory of love and that they nurture their desire for refuge. Just like the authors of our Psalms, the disciples react honestly. You could almost say that they meet Jesus's demand for trust with their total authenticity, with their willingness to ask the wrongest, dumbest questions. Thank goodness, because those questions are still ours.

We can't see the way to heaven anymore than they could, we don't know where or even what it truly is. We may get in an abstract sense that to see Jesus is to see God, but we're also with Philip admitting that our confidence would really be boosted by just one spectacular revelation. But does all of that exasperate Jesus? Yeah, a little bit. He's a little bit frustrated that important lessons still haven't fully sunk in, but the substance of his response is utterly compassionate. The belief required to receive the comfort he's offering is neither complicated nor qualified. To the group who have been walking with him over the
course of months and years, to each of us, he says, "Have you known me even imperfectly? If so, you've known God. "But even if that equation is too much, even if you're still not ready to know me in that way, meditate on the goodness and the truth of the works you've witnessed and the lessons you've learned from me, whatever vestige of trust resides in you, I will make that sufficient.

To take refuge in God is to harbor faith. Faith the height of mountains or the depth of oceans or faith the size of a little mustard seed. It's to persevere and hope that we might one day truly know ourselves as known by God, was a paradox. Because sheltering under God's wings doesn't keep us from acting in the world. Belief, Jesus says, can accomplish more than we can imagine. The refuge of God, the deep comfort at the heart of our faith doesn't close us off. It doesn't tie our hands or muffle our voices. It strengthens us to do God's will. In faith, God puts her people in order. She configures us like the blocks of a spiritual house. We are a temple moving through the world. We are a shelter to be shared.

Amen.