

Text: John 10: 22-30
Title: In the Grip
Date: 05.12.19
Roger Allen Nelson

There is a simple old gospel chorus that I first heard in Roseland when I was in my early twenties. Here's where you might wish this writer-preacher was a singer-preacher, but the lyrics go something like this:

*Jesus be a fence all around me every day.
Woa, woa, Jesus I want you to protect me as I travel along life's way.
Oh, I know you can, (yes Lord). I know you will, (yes Lord).
Healed my body (yes Lord), when I was ill (yes Lord).
Oh-oh, Jesus be a fence all around me every day.*

I remember this little black congregation clapping, stomping, free styling on harmonies and adding deep soulful cries. I remember old folks closing their eyes and swaying and single moms singing with tears streaming down their faces. It was the early 80s, crack cocaine was ravaging the community, and there were better than 900 murders a year in Chicago. You could feel the deep longing for God's protection in an unpredictable violent world.

Jesus be a fence all around me every day.

I guess with a lot less flair we pray for the same.

We pray for "traveling mercies." We pray for God to "watch over" those we love. We long for our children to be safe and secure. And in the middle of middle-America it's relatively easy to feel safe. For most of us life is predictable and we have some kind of fence around us. We don't live in constant fear....

Until there's another shooting in a church, mosque, synagogue, or school, until there's another senseless car crash, until Alzheimer's breaks through or cancer climbs the fence, and we're reminded that even our best defenses are easily breached. Until we're reminded again that we're vulnerable and life is unpredictable, chaotic, and often cruel. And there is no evidence that Christians are somehow exempt or particularly protected...

For no matter how high the fence, no matter how thick the walls, no matter how rigorous the ramparts terrorism, debilitating depression, flood waters, gun violence, and addiction can seep through, or creep in, or storm the gates.

So, what then are we to say?

What are we to say when it feels like the fence is breached?

What are we to believe when we're reminded that life is fragile?

What are we to do when we feel vulnerable?

I invite you into this morning's text for a window into those questions, or maybe just a better image....

Jesus was walking in winter on the porch of Solomon's temple. He may have been simply staying out of the cold ~ the colonnade faced the east and there were massive protective walls to the west. Sometimes teachers walked as they taught to stay warm. But, it was also the setting where kings would hand down judgments about issues of justice. Think of it as the steps of the Supreme Court building.

Jesus was walking in winter on the porch of Solomon's temple during Hanukkah ~ the festival celebrating the rededication of the temple ~ when Jews stopped him in his tracks, encircled him and asked if he was the Messiah. On the steps of the temple they wanted an answer: "Put up or shut up. Will justice come from your hand? Are you the Messiah?"

Now. The Gospel of John is littered with "I am" statements. There are seven:

I am the bread of life...
I am the vine; you are the branches...
I am the resurrection and the life...
Etcetera....

This would seem like the perfect opportunity to proclaim number eight: I am the Messiah. But, Jesus doesn't speak that word or claim that title. Rather, he says, in effect, "Look, I've been telling you who I am. Everything that I've been doing is a window into who God is and who I am. My followers know this. They know me. I know them. They follow me...."

It is a coy little side step. Jesus doesn't say that he is the Messiah, but he doesn't say that he isn't. He says that having to ask is evidence that you haven't been paying attention or that you just don't get it. And then there is this powerful-densely-packed-passage. Translated here by Frederick Dale Bruner:

I am giving them, in turn: deep, lasting Life, and they will never perish, and no one will ever snatch these people out of my grip. The people my Father gave me are greater than all other things (on earth) and no one will ever snatch that people out of my Father's grip.

Three times, buried in those few lines, Jesus says that his followers will never slip from the security of his grip. He has hold of them. God has hold of them. So, in response to being asked "Are you the Messiah?" Jesus says that the people God has given him are ultimately and eternally secure in him.

Dear friends, you are ultimately and eternally secure in God.

The language of the Reformed tradition for this is the “perseverance (or preservation) of the saints.” On the occasion of its 400th birthday, to paraphrase article 8 of the 5th Main Point of Doctrine in the Canons of Dort:

If it were up to us: if it were up to our merits, our strength, our faith, and our grip, we would fall away. But, it is not up to us, it is up to God, and God’s counsel can’t be changed, God’s promises can’t fail, God’s purposes can’t be revoked, God’s work can’t be rendered ineffectual, God grip can’t be loosed.

When corralled on the Solomon’s porch and asked about being the Messiah, Jesus said he’d never lose his people. It’s an odd and obtuse answer. It’s not what they expected or wanted to hear. In fact, when he followed it up by saying that he and God were one, they pick up stones to kill him.

Canadian singer-songwriter Kathleen Edwards, while going through a divorce from her guitar-player-husband, wrote a song with this central line:

I am looking for a soft place to land, the forest floor, the palm of your hands....

It is a haunting beautiful line.

When everything is falling apart,
when evil has breached the fence,
when we feel loose and lost,
we want the security of the earth beneath our feet and to be gently and unfailingly held in the palm of God’s hands. Kathleen Edwards taps into the deep human longing for something unshakable and unassailable, something that will prevail against all the hell that this world can throw our way. A soft place to land.

Jesus doesn’t give any answers here for why the fence is breached.

He doesn’t explain or excuse or exclude the terrors of this world.
Rightly we would shake our fist at God in protest and cry out, “why?”
Rightly we would be angry. There is never reason enough for the pain and suffering in this world. To credit God’s plan or purpose is to run roughshod over the reality of human suffering.

But, the Gospel of John proclaims that

before his hands were nailed to a tree,
before his hands were cold and rigid in the grave,
before he opened his wounded-resurrected-hands to his disciples, Jesus promised that he would never let us slip from the palm of his hands. Thanks be to God.

Kathleen Dean Moore in *Great Tide Rising* writes about how life returns when areas are destroyed by things like volcanic eruptions. She recounts that scientists have discovered pockets under rocks and in the leeward side of trees where little bits of life survives. And then from these places, called *refugia*, new life emerges, takes root, and spreads out.

I like that idea. In the face of destruction, when the fence is breached, there is *refugia*, there are pockets of refuge and hope. There are places of resurrection.

Rachel Held Evans – a young mother, wife, and author – died unexpectedly a little more than a week ago. She was 37, wise and gifted beyond her years. Her work and writing were a *refugia* ~ a life-giving shelter for many who often felt lost and marginalized by the church.

Debra Rienstra in reflecting on her loss writes this:

So many people long for refugia for the soul—people sick with grief, or languishing in depression, or systematically despised, or weary from long years of low-grade struggle. Ideally the church would provide a flourishing ecosystem where a huge diversity of people could heal and rest and grow strong. Ideally the church would cultivate spiritual habitats characterized by a complex and beautiful dance of mutual life-giving. Sometimes we even achieve that.

Dear friends, you are ultimately and eternally secure in God.

What we long for are tangible expressions of that reality.

We want to know that we are firmly in the grip of God's hand.

We want to know *refugia*....

I think that's a wonderful image for our calling.

May we be a community of *refugia* that embodies the grip of God's hand. May Hope be a little pocket of resurrection life that stands with and for those who are beat up and beat down. May we be defined, not by a fence, but by a deep trust in the unshakable and unassailable grip of God. And in that confidence, may our little corner of creation offer shelter where lives and spirits can rest, grow, and flourish. May each of us be something of the hand of God,
until that day when God will wipe every tear from our eyes,
and we will be secure in the City of God ~ where there will be no more brokenness, or tears, or evil, or pain, or death.

You are ultimately and eternally secure in the grip of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.