

Soul Fortress
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
Sunday, April 24-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Psalm 62

Because this is GEMS Sunday, I wanted to make this sermon understandable for you GEMS. I wanted to say things for everyone, but hopefully say it in a way that a nine-year-old could understand. I know that not all GEMS are 9, some of you are older and some of you are younger, but I'm aiming in the middle. And, I hope the whole congregation will benefit from it. It's no secret that most of you like the children's sermon more than the regular sermon, so I think this will be okay.

Let me read Psalm 62. Psalm 62:2 has been the GEMS verse all year and your theme has been "Unshakeable." Let's read the whole Psalm, and as I read it, notice that the psalm is shaped a little like a song that you might sing in church. It's like a song with a two verses and a refrain. That's right, Psalm 62 has a refrain. You see the refrain in verses 1 and 2 and verses 4 and 5. When I read them you will notice that they are almost exactly the same. The only difference is that usually when we sing a song with a refrain, the refrain comes after the verse. Here the refrain comes before the verse. Let's read it.

I had a good childhood. I grew up in a house that was full of love and full of Jesus. I always had enough to eat. My parents played games with me and read me bedtime stories. We lived in a fun neighborhood with lots of kids. If I had to describe my feelings during those years, I would say that I felt safe and secure. I didn't have to worry about anything. I just had to get up, be a kid, and enjoy the world. Every day was an adventure. That doesn't mean I was never sad. Like any kid, I cried. I cried when I fell and skinned my knee, I cried when my brother got more ice cream than me, and I cried when mom beat me at cards, but those weren't real worries. Those aren't things that keep you awake at night. Basically I didn't have anything to really worry about.

That all changed when my family moved to England. I was 10. My dad worked in England for a year and the whole family moved over there with him. We lived in an English town, we lived in an English house, and I went to an English school. And for the first time in my life I didn't feel completely safe because I was different. I came from a different place, I had a different way of talking and so people thought I was strange.

In England they speak English, but they use different words. They call things by different names. Let me give you some examples. You know what a truck is, but in England, they don't call it a truck, they call it a "lorry." You know what pants are-the things you wear on your legs; in England they don't call them pants; they called them "trousers." And when you drive to Holland you drive on the highway, but when I was in England they didn't call it a highway, they called it a "dual carriage way" or a "motorway." So there were all these different words, and sometimes I used the wrong words. So If I said, "I'm going to change my pants, get in my truck and drive down the highway," other kids would look at me and think what is he talking about!?! What's wrong with him?!" At school it sometimes felt like everyone was looking at me and saying: 'There's that strange kid from America!' It made me worry. It made me nervous.

Sometimes kids would actually make fun of me because I was different. "Ahh you're from Canada," or because they couldn't tell the difference in my accent, "you talk funny you're from America." Sometimes they would say, "You're a yank. You're a dumb yank." One time I was in the woods walking home with a friend and some kids heard me talking and they started

throwing stones at me because I was a yank. “Get out of here you yank! We don’t want you here!” I had to run. I survived my time in England, and now I am very glad that I lived there, but at the time, it was hard, and for the first time in my life I didn’t feel safe. It wasn’t a nice feeling.

I thought of that part of my life when I was studying Psalm 62 this week. I thought of it because of something David—the person who wrote the psalm—says in his poem. In the third verse of the poem he paints a picture of his feelings. He says he feels like a ‘leaning wall’ or a ‘tottering fence.’ What kind of feeling is that? Is that a good feeling? No. It’s a terrible feeling. When you feel like a leaning wall or a tottering fence, you feel like you are going to fall over. Like you are going to collapse. You feel like hard things have been smashing into you over and over again. Even though you used to be a strong wall, you used to stand up straight, now you feel like if one more thing smashes into you, you are going to fall over. You are going to crumble into pieces.

David even says why he feels like a wall that’s about to fall over. It’s because of what other people are doing. They’re being nasty. They pretend to be nice to him, but behind his back they are mean. “With their mouths they bless, but in their hearts they curse.” When I was in England trying to fit in, when people were calling me names and throwing stones at me, there were times when I felt like a leaning wall, a tottering fence.

Maybe some of you are old enough to know that feeling. If you aren’t, you will be soon. You probably won’t hear people say they feel like a leaning wall or a tottering fence—you are more likely to hear them talk about *anxiety*. A friend will say to you, ‘I have anxiety.’ Maybe some of you have heard that already. Maybe you’ve heard of some of your classmates who struggle with anxiety, classmates who feel overwhelmed and who sometimes miss school just because it all feels like too much for them. Maybe some of you have that struggle with anxiety. If you do you’re not alone. There are lots and lots and lots of people your age who feel this way. Who feel wobbly. Who feel like if just one more thing smashes into them, if one more bad thing happens to them, they will crumble. It’s a terrible feeling.

What do you do when this is how you feel? What do you do when you feel like a leaning wall and a tottering fence? Where do you turn when you feel like, “if one more sad thing happens, I will fall apart.” David tells us in the refrain of his Psalm. He says, “Truly my soul, finds rest in God alone; my hope comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation. He is my fortress. I will not be shaken.”

That’s interesting. In his poem David shows us two very different pictures. When David looks at himself, what’s the picture? He sees a leaning wall and a tottering fence. He sees himself as weak. David looks at himself and he thinks if one more bad thing happens to me I will fall over. But in the refrain, David doesn’t look at himself; he looks at God. And what’s the picture he sees? A leaning wall? No. When David looks at God, he sees a rock. When David looks at God, he sees a fortress, a fortress that is unshakeable. When you are shaking, when day is full of trouble and anxiety, David says you can take shelter in the fortress of God’s presence and love “Truly my soul finds rest in God alone: My salvation comes from him. He is my rock and my salvation. He is my fortress; I will never be shaken...”

You are out in the world and people are not very nice to you, you’re dodging stones all day long and you come home tired and sad. You are overwhelmed. David says to you (and he really wants you to hear it so he puts it in the refrain so you hear it twice) ‘There is a place you can go to rest and be safe. You can go to the fortress of God’s love. You go to that fortress and knock on the door. Jesus opens it. He smiles and says your name. He lets you in. He’ll put his arm around your shoulders, and sit you down at his table.’ He looks you in the eye and says, “I

can see you are tired and sad, but don't be afraid. I am always here. I know that it can be hard out there, but don't worry, come to me and I will give you rest. Knock at my door and I will always let you in. Tell me what's going on and I will listen, I will feed you, and you will find rest for your soul."

That sounds really good doesn't it. How do you get to that place? How do you connect with that place? David says you connect to that place through your soul. My soul finds rest in God. My soul finds rest in the fortress of God's love. Here's a way to think about it. When you belong to Jesus, when he has put his spirit in you and you have opened your heart to him, there is a fortress inside of you. He set up a fortress of love in your soul. And he lives in that fortress. He defends that fortress. Everything else in your life might be shaking and uncertain. Your mind might be going crazy with worry (oh no oh no oh no). Your eyes might be flowing with tears. Your mouth might be saying all sorts of anxious words. "What am I going to do?! What am I going to do!" Your whole body might literally be shaking—that happens sometimes when people are really sad or really worried—but there is always a part of you held by Jesus, protected by Jesus, whatever happens to you on the outside, the real you is protected and held by Jesus in that soul fortress.

Sometimes you don't know that this soul fortress is there until everything else starts shaking. Irina Ratushinskaya lived in Russia when the communists were in power. She was a teacher and a poet. She was also a Christian. She loved and followed Jesus. But in Russia at that time, you weren't allowed to talk about Jesus, especially if you were a teacher talking to students. You were supposed to teach that there was no God. That God didn't exist. Irina didn't do that. She told her students that God existed. She told them about Jesus. So the police came and they threw her in jail. They didn't just throw her in any old jail, they threw her into what they called the 'small prison.' It was like a prison within a prison. You sat in a tiny cell, you didn't get to talk with anyone, and, to make matters worse, there was no heat, so in winter the cell was freezing.

You might say, in that prison they tried to shake Irina. They tried to break her. But in prison, while everything else in her life was shaking, Irina realized that there was one place in her life that didn't shake, and that was the that fortress of God's love in her soul. They could make her hungry and sad, they could make her whole body shake with cold, but they couldn't do anything to shake that place where Jesus held her. Her soul found rest in God. Here's some of what she wrote: "When you are in trouble, under pressure, God always seems closer. He was like a hand on our shoulder in the camp." Can you hear what she's saying? No matter what they did she felt the fortress of Jesus' calm. Here's the first poem she wrote after she got set free. I think it sounds a little like David's poem. Believe me, it was often thus: In solitary cells, on winter nights
A sudden sense of joy and warmth. And a resounding note of love. And then, unsleeping, I would know
A-huddle by an icy wall: Someone is thinking of me now, "Truly my soul finds rest in God alone: My salvation comes from him. He is my rock and my salvation. He is my fortress; I will never be shaken..."

In a way, everything we do in church is trying to tell you about that soul fortress, and to get you to live your whole life out of that place. We are always trying to bring you to that place where Jesus holds you, and then to center your life on that place. That's why all your GEMS counselors work so hard to tell you about Jesus. That's why your parents teach you to pray. That's why we sing the songs and tell the Bible stories. Because we know the shaking will come. We know that the worry will come, and when it does, we want you to know that Jesus is strong and good and full of love and he is in you already. So GEMS and all the rest of you children of

God, hear the good news, *“Your souls find rest in God alone. Your salvation comes from Jesus. He is your fortress, and you will never be shaken.”*

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