

“Rescue”

*Dangerous Wonder, part 2, based on the book by Mike Yaconelli
(NavPress: Colorado Springs, 2003)*

Psalm 18:4-19

[67] This is an amazing place to be. If you didn't know that, I hope now you do. This is a place where God changes lives.

Do me a favor. Find someone sitting next to you, look them in the eye, and tell them, “God will never give up on you.” It's true. God is not yet finished with a single person here, and if we pour out our hearts together to God, we will find something incredible. I invite you, as you're willing, to stretch out your hands, palms open, before God right now, to receive what God has for you as we pray.

Lord, you are amazing. You reign over all the earth. And we come before you this morning, simply asking you to show up in a new way. Open our ears to listen and make our hearts fertile soil for your Word to be planted and grow. We are ready to listen. Please speak to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

[68] I was terrified. It took every ounce of my nerve to try to stay calm and not panic. I was submerged in the raging waters of the Cumberland River at flood stage, completely alone, with a lifejacket around my chest and a paddle in my hand. I couldn't see the raft. I couldn't see a single person; only white water and rocks, big, hard, scary rocks, and if I was thrown up against them, it was going to hurt, bad.

In 2011, I took a mission team to Tennessee for a home repair project for one week. It rained every single day. Literally. The road was washed out hours after we arrived, and heavy thunderstorms dumped inches of rain into the narrow valleys of the Appalachians everywhere we looked. It was a wonder we even completed our work.

Naturally, I thought we'd have a fun, relaxing day off rafting the Cumberland River, just below the famous Cumberland Falls, as a treat for our hard-working group. Remember what I said about the rain? It more than doubled the depth and speed of the current. We had to trust our guide, who thought it was funny to randomly grab people and throw them off the raft. But, being the guys we were, we thought, “We're tough. What could go wrong?”

We managed to shoot several strong rapids without losing a single passenger, up until the very last one. The guide told us to row left, then right, then backwards, as we approached a huge boulder dividing the raging river in half. We hit the rock at full-speed, and launched the raft vertically. The guide and one teenager were the only ones who managed to stay on board. The rest of us – five in all, were dumped unceremoniously into the worst part of the rapids.

Others actually had a worse time than I fighting the river. I popped up out of the water about 30 seconds later and floated downstream in a somewhat calmer side of the river. Others tumbled about for several minutes, caught in the hydraulics. One traveler told me later, “I thought I was going to die. And so I finally gave up and let go, and the moment I did, I surfaced. The river let me free, but I had no strength to do anything but float.” Eventually, our guide found him, and with every ounce of his strength, lifted him back to the safety of the raft.

[69] There are times in life when we feel upside-down, out of control, and we wonder, who is going to rescue us? Suddenly, when we’ve given up all hope, a hand reaches out and grabs us. But here’s the thing: that same hand that saves you is just as likely to throw you overboard.

Have you ever felt that way? Maybe your life was literally in danger, but maybe it was a more subtle attack. One decision or circumstance led to another, and another. One drop of rain, and then another, and the current of your life had suddenly swept you off your feet and you were fighting for breath, for peace, for security, for stability, for anything good and positive. Have you ever been there?

Whether or not we like to admit it, we’re all helpless. We are either in a storm, coming out of a storm, or there’s one on the horizon. Fortunately for us, we don’t make this journey alone, and the Bible speaks directly to the storms we encounter.

[70] The book of Psalms describes storms and raging rivers, literally and figuratively. There are more psalms of laments or cries for help than any other type of psalm, even more than psalms of praise to God. Why is that? Because storms are part of life. They always have been, and they always will be.

I want to examine a particular rescue story in Psalm 18 this morning. This writer was in bad shape, surrounded by enemies too strong to resist. The author was at the brink of death. Look again at verse four, where you find the phrase

“torrents of destruction.” Do you know what that means? Chaos. Evil. Wickedness. “Hell.” (MSG) This was not a simple battle, it was not just a physical sickness, storm, or even a near-drowning. It was a spiritual attack. The writer’s soul was at stake.

So the psalmist did what any of us would do. The psalmist cried to God for help. And God heard the cry. God showed up.

[71] Last week, we discussed how God showing up may be a good thing, but it is also a scary thing. It’s uncomfortable, to say the least. Listen to the images the psalmist uses to describe God’s awesomeness, from my own paraphrase of verses 7-15: “The earth shook, fire broke out. God cut the heavens in two and stepped in, stepped down, clouds under his feet. The angels delivered God to my doorstep. God was all darkness and storm clouds, when brilliance burst through. Blazing hailstones and lightning! God’s voice, a deafening thunderclap. God’s arrows lightning; they scattered and routed my enemies. God’s breath was enough to expose the bottom of the sea and the roots of the mountains.”

[72] There is a reason why, in so many Bible stories, the angels say, “Fear not!” Because the presence of God is overwhelming, awesome, and frightening. God shows up in power, riding the wings of the angels. And by the way, these particular angels, the cherubim, are always around when God is about judge someone. In this case, our enemies, like: the Devil. Sin. Death. Anxiety. Fear. Disappointment. Brokenness.

[73] Then look what happens in verse 16: “God reached down from on high and took hold of me; God drew me out of deep waters.” The Israelites were not sea-faring people. They didn’t build ships and race across the Mediterranean. I’ll bet most of them couldn’t swim. So the most terrifying death to an Israelite may very well have been drowning in the ocean. Yet God’s great and terrible hand, the one that cast out lightning and hailstones, reached out, pulled the psalmist up to safe, level ground.

[74] Sometimes, the rescue is as scary as the emergency. Mike Yaconelli tells a great rescue story in his book, Dangerous Wonder. In South Carolina, a huge loggerhead turtle got lost after laying its eggs, and a beachcomber found it in the hot sand dunes, nearly dead. After calling for help, the beachcomber watched anxiously as a ranger flipped the heavy turtle in on its back, tied it to

heavy chains, and towed it back to the sea with his truck. Although it seemed the ride would kill the turtle, it miraculously survived and swam back into the sea. The beachcomber noted, “It’s sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or being saved by the hands that have turned your life upside down.” (DW, page 134.)

The Bible tells us over and over to trust God. 1 Peter 5:7 says, “Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you.” Philippians 4:6 tells us to “not be anxious about anything...but pray.” There are things we fear in this life, however, we need to remember the power of the One who overcomes.

[75] Have you placed your life in those hands? I have. And it’s been scary. It’s been scary to be unemployed, because of my call to ministry. It’s been scary to enter a church and serve, to be the “chief, cook, and bottle washer.” It’s tempting to do everything myself, take on all the burdens myself, and fear failure. God does not want me to do it all. I’m not supposed to try and save myself. I can’t anyway. God doesn’t want any of us to try and save ourselves.

We are here to make disciples of Jesus Christ who transform the world. To do that, we need to start trusting the One who is both terrifying and loving, whose hands are mighty, who controls the wind and the waves, the sea and the stars, whose hands hold fire and lightning and thunder. Those hands were humbly nailed to a cross 2000 years ago so that we could be saved from our sin.

Are you willing to place your life in the hands of the one who has the power to destroy you or save you? God could destroy us but chooses not to. God chooses to love us. That’s the Almighty God. That’s the Savior Jesus Christ. That is the Mighty Holy Spirit, the wind that blows wherever it pleases. There is only one who has the power to save us.

Will you trust this Almighty one, put your life in Jesus Christ?

As I close this message, I want to give you an opportunity again to follow Jesus. It is a simple yet profound step, to be forgiven and enter into a scary, thrilling, life-giving relationship with God. Even as we continue in our worship and get ready to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, Jesus is inviting you now to say yes to him. We know we have all fallen short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23). We all, at some point in our lives, have turned our backs on God and chose our own selfish ways. Yet, because of the crucifixion of Jesus, God’s own son, we

can know the mercy, grace, and love of God. It is scary, for sure, to trust your life into unseen hands, into a God you might not even know very well. But it is the best decision you can ever make, I promise you.

If you want to trust Jesus, right now, with your life, I ask you to do three things. First, admit your need for Jesus. Admit to him, right now, your sin and brokenness. Don't worry about using fancy words. Just say, “Jesus, I'm sorry.” Second, tell Jesus you love him. Tell him thank you for dying on the cross to save you. Tell Jesus to come in and turn your life upside-right. Call him your Lord, call him your Savior, call him your Master – whatever it means to you to submit your life fully to Christ. And finally, believe that is enough. Grace comes with no strings attached. If you say yes to Jesus, he will save you. Period.

If that's your choice this morning, I ask you that share your decision with someone else today. Even during communion, you can simply tell me, “Pastor, I did it.” I'll know what you're talking about. It's important when you decide to follow Jesus that you belong to a community of faith, a church, that will help you grow. We need each other. None of us have faith completely figured out, not even me, but we do know enough that Jesus expects us to help each other. If you want to speak to me about baptism and church membership and any other questions you have, I welcome that conversation.

Let us continue with the prayer of confession and pardon as we prepare to receive communion.

Memory Verse

Psalm 139:7

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”

Reflection questions

1. What does the phrase “holy terror” mean to you? Is it one way you would describe God?
2. What attribute about God terrifies you? What comforts you?
3. Have you ever had a moment when your life was so upside-down, you didn't know if you were dying or being rescued?

4. What has God rescued you from? Where in your life do you still need rescuing?
5. Whom can you pray for that needs spiritual rescue?