

The Rock
First Reading: Philippians 4:4-7
Second Reading: Psalm 62

A classic proverb says that iron sharpens iron, implying that when strength is met with strength, both become stronger. Iron is a symbol of strength and solidity. Yet, where iron is measured at an impressive value of up to 80 on the Vickers Scale of Hardness, a diamond is measured at a whopping 10,000. The De Beers commercials may not technically be true. A diamond is (not) forever, for it will eventually turn to graphite, but that will take millions, if not billions, of years. So in 1477 when Maximilian, the Archduke of Austria gave Mary of Burgundy a diamond ring at their engagement, it made a statement as a dazzlingly symbolic measure of the strength and permanence of their marriage commitment.

Eventually, some 470 years later, Maximilian's sparkling indulgence stirred up a trend that finally reached the masses beginning in 1947 when a Philadelphia ad writer, named Frances Gerety, remembered she had not come up with a tag line for the new series of ads she had put together for her client. Exhausted and on her way to bed she wrote down on a slip of paper the only four words that came to mind — *A Diamond is Forever*. It

would be named the slogan of the century, its impact being far more significant than even *Where's the Beef* and *Plop, Plop, Fizz, Fizz*.

As far as rocks go, you won't find a better symbol of permanence and strength, even without the sparkles, but is a diamond truly forever? Marriages break up; diamonds are lost or stolen. You've probably seen the viral videos of choreographed proposals going awry as when the dude fumbles the ring off the deck of the rented yacht. *A diamond is forev... oops!*

And perhaps ... or in a way, that video is more symbolic of life than the rock is of permanence. Paul says, "*We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.*" Obviously, Paul hasn't kept us from denying this truth. And yet, as with the fumble-fingered groom-in-waiting, who just watched a few thousand K sink into the abyss, life doesn't always turn out according to our meticulously choreographed plans. Prudential uses the Rock of Gibraltar to foster the illusion that their foundation and your security will always be solid and strong. Duane Johnson goes by *The Rock* and proudly displays his sculpted muscles to cultivate the image of invulnerability.

But as we saw in 1873, 1918, 1929, 1941, 2001, 2008, and 2020, corporations and institutions can't promise permanence and behind the mask of *The Rock* is a finite and vulnerable human. Perhaps a granite sculpture of the dude fumbling the diamond into the sea would be a more accurate symbol to reflect human striving. We want to be strong. We want our promises to evoke permanence. We want the cast and choreography of our life plan to fall into the places we appoint for them, according to our wishes and expectations.

But then the diamond finds a permanent home with SpongeBob; or the promises of the partner are broken; or the diagnosis immediately alters life's trajectory; or the bank announces layoffs; or the reservist is called to active duty; or a pandemic dismantles your plans like a bully destroying your *Lego* castle; or the confidante betrays a confidence; or it seems that if you're incredibly late, it is ordained that you will pull in behind a slow driver; or the promised delivery date passes without a delivery; or a colleague indulges your drivenness by letting you do his work for him; or a day comes to an end and you realize everyone you encountered was a disappointment; or a politician, zealot, or terrorist chooses your

neighborhood to be bombed; or a famine spreads because of a combination of red tape, ethnic hate, turf wars, and indifference.

You may be an excellent planner and spreadsheets are the pallet for your genius. You've got folders with schedules, folders for costs and capital expenditures, folders mapping out who is responsible for doing what, and folders for contingencies; but spreadsheets may not shield you from variables like weather, illness, error, negligence, rebellion, death. Sometimes life looks like the guy fumbling the ring into the bay. The plan was perfect, except...

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr spoke of the inevitability of human anxiety. As humans, we are unavoidably involved with nature's volatility, society's institutional and logistical contingencies, and human vulnerability. Last Sunday's playoff game in Buffalo was postponed to Monday because they couldn't get enough people to shovel the snow out of the stands, and thousands upon thousands of people started sounding like pirates, "*Arrrgh!*" Players, coaches, reporters, vendors, fans with tickets, fans at home, camera operators, sportscasters, network and NFL executives, man-cave denizen's with bowls of guacamole and bottles of cheap beer who planned a watch

party for Sunday but had to work on Monday — “*Arrrrgh!*” See what I mean? Pirates.

One weather event and a universe of plans are disrupted. Anxiety — Our best laid plans inevitably engage nature’s volatility and logistical unpredictability and human finitude. We rely on all sorts of factors outside of ourselves — and as humans, we have the ability to stand outside of those factors and see their limitations, faults, and hazards — so here comes the anxiety dripping on your forehead through sleepless nights, cheering on your doubts about the motivations and efforts of those people on whom you depend, plaguing your mind with images exposing the futility of your efforts. Anxiety like rust chews away at your spirit. Anxiety is a tornado to your hopes, and this anxiety only ratchets up as you continue to try to control the uncontrollable, try to erase uncertainty, try to put your finger in the dike to hold back failure.

And so it is that the voice of Augustine continues to speak truth through the parade of centuries. “Restless are our hearts, O Lord, until they find their rest in Thee.”

I wonder if Augustine had recently read today's Psalm? For the Psalmist, like you, like me, has encountered some disorienting disappointment. The psalmist feels the fool for having been deceived by flattery. Someone or some clique of contemporaries have charmed him in person, but trashed him behind his back. *How long will you assail a person, will you batter your victim, all of you, as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence? Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence. They take pleasure in falsehood; they bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse.*

They took advantage of the Psalmist when he was most vulnerable, when he was *a leaning wall, a tottering fence*. We don't know the identity of the con artists, but they must have been from the South — *they bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse*. "Well, bless your heart..." Words that strike panic and insecurity deep in your soul when heard in these parts.

The Psalmist's trust in his worldview has been breached, leading him to question his handle on all things. The world's not fitting into the shape he had formed for it.

You've been beating your head up against that conundrum since you were a kid; shoulders slumped, lower lip protruding, whining commencing

— *Nobody listens to me; Everyone's against me.* What was it that Sinatra crooned?

I make a date for golf -
 You can bet your life it rains
 I try to give a party -
 And the guy upstairs complains
 I guess I'll go thru life;
 Just catchin' colds and missin' trains
 Everything happens to me

How easily are you captured by the idea that though the world seems to work for everyone else, somebody keeps messing with your gyroscope — disorientation, disillusionment, disappointment, despair.

In our Bible study this week, someone alluded to an observation from that grand Poobah of Old Testament interpretation, Walter Brueggemann. Brueggemann recognized the genius of the Psalmist in the way the writer structured many of the Psalms according to a typical experience of life and faith. The structure is Orientation—Disorientation—Reorientation.

You have a plan, you order your world and the people in it—
 Orientation.

But the world mocks your plan and the people don't meet your expectations—Disorientation.

So, who can you trust? What is trustworthy, even when the earthquake hits. Before, you may have stood with the crowd assenting to a set of beliefs, but then you left the church thinking, *Now this is the real world. I've got this. The world will bend to my will.* But it doesn't. Plans disrupted, spirit disillusioned, brain disoriented. Yet maybe, just maybe, a still small voice is heard — *Hey, remember me? Look at the marks left by the nails in my hands. I wasn't kidding. Look at how far love goes. I will not leave you desolate*—Reorientation.

The Psalmist's disappointment in his peers is eclipsed by the steadfast attention and love of God. *"For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us."*

What reason is there to trust this truth? What evidence is there to reorient our lives to this God?

To Abraham and Sarah, God said, *“I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”*

In Genesis 45, Joseph said to the brothers who sold him into slavery, *“I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life ... Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.*

In Exodus 3, the Lord told Moses, *“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”*

What did the Lord say through the prophet Hosea? *“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce*

anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”

What did Jesus say to his disciples before his arrest? *“Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy ... So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”*

Reflecting on the death and resurrection of Christ, what did Paul say? *For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

The Psalmist wasn't just writing poetry; the Psalmist was proclaiming what he experienced as true — God is our hope, our rock, our salvation, our fortress, our deliverance, our honor — The Psalmist implores us to understand — *Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.* Knowing this, trusting this is where our peace is found, where our anxious spirits are calmed, where our fears are transformed into faith.

Jesus said, *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

“So, may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Amen.