

**SERMON**  
**“BE BORN IN US TODAY: BRINGING GUIDANCE”**  
**Psalm 31:1-5**  
**Sunday, December 4, 2022**

A friend of mine told me of a time he became lost in the deep woods of the Cascade Mountains in Oregon. It began, he said, as he drove to the ranger’s office to secure a permit for the cutting of a Noble Fir for his family’s Christmas Tree. After securing the permit he drove to the area designated for cutting trees. *“So, there I was with saw and rope in hand ready to enter the woods to find myself the perfect Christmas tree;”* he told me.

*“You should know,”* he warned me, *“that I am not a mountaineering person. It was afternoon as I entered the woods alone in search of the perfect Christmas tree. I had too late a start and I went in solo. The tree eluded me for hours as a gentle snow began to fall, covering my tracks. As the sun began to set with no tree in tow, I suddenly realized as I turned around that I was not sure which way to go to get back to my car. Two trails appeared before me, neither revealing any clear tracks because of the snow.*

*I sat on a log and pondered which trail to take. I remember praying for guidance. Then it was still for a few moments until I heard a rustling and footsteps. ‘A bear!’ I thought, ‘Great! This ends with a bear encounter!’ I turned, trembling. To my utter surprise, coming from behind me was, not a bear, but Jerry, a member of our church, pulling a freshly cut noble fir behind him.*

*‘You’re lost,’ he said, calling my name.*

*‘Totally,’ I admitted.*

*Jerry knew these woods like the back of his hand, and he knew me. He put his hand on my shoulder and said simply, ‘Follow me.’ I did. He guided me out of the woods. The next morning there was a noble fir Christmas tree on our front porch.*

In the words of Psalm 31:3, Jerry was “a rock and fortress” for my friend that day. My friend trusted him to ‘lead and guide him’ to safety not only because he knew him well but that he had complete confidence that Jerry knew those woods well. But that’s not all Jerry and my friend shared in common, they were very much aware that night that God was the one busy all day orchestrating my friend’s safe arrival home despite his mistakes in the woods. It turns out God is very good at leading and guiding.

Now that you have heard my friend’s story, let’s take a closer look at our Scripture for further direction. Psalm 31 is a prayer for guidance accredited to King David. Dean Nadasdy, writing for Creative Communications for the Parish, reminds us that the Psalms were originally a collection of songs to be sung by God’s people. Quoting an old proverb Nadasdy says, *“To sing is to pray twice.”* Therefore, to know that these words from the 31<sup>st</sup> Psalm were first sung, says Nadasdy, *“enhances their intensity.”* It is believed that David wrote these verses during a very dark time of his life: his son Absalom not only was planning to assassinate his father; but seize his father’s throne as well.

Just reading through the first five verses of the psalm, you can catch the urgency of David’s situation. He begins with a prayer for deliverance and rescue, asking God to be his rock and fortress. Then, still in prayer, he confesses that this is exactly what God is for him, a rock and fortress. He has complete trust that God will lead and guide him out of this situation. Mary Pipher, in her book Seeking Peace says that there is a vast difference between prayer and worry. *“With worry,”* she says, *“we are helpless; with prayer, we are interceding.”* David turns to prayer not because he is worried about being overthrown by his son; but because he knows that prayer changes how one looks at life. His prayer is an act of trust in the God who leads and guides.

I can’t help but think of the two 6-year-olds who were discussing Santa Claus. The first one said; “Santa Claus isn’t real. It’s just your parents.”

The other kid protested: “Not true. My parents couldn’t afford all that stuff.” We know God is real because we, like David, have come to trust him. That’s why, with his next breath, David is so quickly able to commit his very soul to God. *“Into your hands I commit my spirit;”* he says. These words would become a cherished prayer spoken for centuries by Jewish children at bedtime. The prayer’s significance would be even more enhanced when Jesus spoke the prayer from the cross just before he died: *“Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit.”* Dean Nadasdy of Creative Communications for the Parish says of Jesus’ prayer: *“Our Lord on the cross fell*

*asleep in his Father's arms, trusting that he was safe."*

The story of Advent is a story of God leading and guiding. From a fallen Eden where God promised one who would crush the serpent's head to Abraham, called by God to lead a chosen nation; from the redeeming exodus of God's enslaved people to the return of God's people from exile in Babylon; from the prophets to the songwriters, from God choosing Mary to give birth to the world's Savior to John the Baptist preparing his way; from Bethlehem to Nazareth to Capernaum to Jerusalem and back to the Father's side; from the teaching to the healing, from the dying to the rising; from the apostles and martyrs to the church today; through it all, through every twist in the plot of our sacred story, God has been leading and guiding.

We too know the Lord, says Nadasdy, *"We trust in the Lord to lead and guide us because of this amazing rescue history, this great sacred story arching over all of human history."* We trust the Lord, also, because in our own stories we have experienced his leading and guiding. There are times for us, like David's, when we are threatened or lost or uncertain, struggling to decide which way to go. It's like sitting lost in a darkening forest and hearing rustling behind us. We can think the worst. We can be like children crying in the night. Then, because we know the Lord, there comes this prayer, David's prayer, as paraphrased in The Message: *"You're my cave to hide in, my cliff to climb. Be my safe leader, be my true mountain guide. Free me from hidden traps; I want to hide in you. I've put my life in your hands. You won't drop me, you'll never let me down."*

Many of you may be familiar with the poet Christina Rossetti. She is best known for the lyrics she wrote for the Christmas classic "In the Bleak Midwinter." Writing in the mid-19th century, her children's poetry and her religious verse are still read and cherished today. A little-known poem by Rossetti is titled "Up-Hill" and presents a dialogue between a trekker ascending toward an inn and a voice encouraging her along the way. The poem is structured very simply: the uphill traveler asks questions and the encouraging voice responds. For Christians, it is easy to identify that voice as the voice of God, affirming the promises of safety and rest.

*"Does the road wind up-hill all the way? **Yes, to the very end.***

*Will the day's journey take the whole long day? **Yes, from morn to night, my friend.***

*But is there for the night a resting-place? **Yes, a roof for when the slow dark hours begin.***

*May not the darkness hide it from my face? **No, you cannot miss that inn.***

Isn't it great to know that throughout all life God is with us to lead and to guide. As Christmas nears let us follow in David's footsteps and pray with confidence: *"Lord Christ, be born in us today."*