

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, 24
Acts 7:55-60; John 14:1-6

Family and friends of our graduating Midshipmen and members of the Class of 2014, welcome to your Baccalaureate. Thirty years ago this month I attended my own Baccalaureate. To this day I still remember the text, the preacher, and the sermon he preached because God spoke to me through that sermon and altered the very course of my life. I don't exaggerate when I say that I probably wouldn't be here today were it not for the Baccalaureate preached by Dr. Robert Asa at the First Baptist Church in Oakland City, Indiana in May of 1984. So may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts have a similar impact on us as we open our ears to hear the voice of God while his word is preached today.

I take for my text the words of the 31st Psalm – a portion of which was read just moments ago. Psalm 31 was written by King David during a difficult time in his life. The details are obscure but the difficulties are obvious. When you read the Psalm you see that David was in danger, he prayed for deliverance, trusted God for protection, and found courage through faith. In light of this Psalm, my message is simple: Graduating Midshipmen, you go into a dangerous world; you go with a dependable God; go out with a durable faith and you will triumph by and by.

First, be aware of this foundational fact: You go into a dangerous world. I hesitate to mention this because many of your family members are present and the last thing they want to hear from me or anyone else is any mention of the danger that awaits you in the world that surrounds you. I understand their feelings. One of my own children is currently deployed to Afghanistan. A few nights ago I received the following notice via e-mail: "On 12 May 2014 SSgt Gore was posted at his Command Post. At 0248 hours, his Base was attacked with 12 107mm rockets. SSgt Gore immediately took control of 12 patrols and several entry control points. He initiated lockdown of his sector and coordinated sector sweeps to identify damage. SSgt Gore also served as the liaison for between the Joint Defense Operations Center, the Explosive Ordinance Disposal Team, the Fire Department and the Provost Marshal's Office. His quick and timely actions assisted in an expedited response by all involved parties and ensured protection of life and military resources." That's my son. And that, Midshipmen, is the world into which you go. You go into a dangerous world.

Now all of that is true but it's really nothing new. The world has been a dangerous place for a very long time. A week ago I was visiting with Lieutenant Commander Dan Hall. Dan is a bit of a genealogist and he told me a remarkable fact about his clan. Beginning with his 9th great grandfather who fought in King Philip's War – a war between Native Americans and English colonists living in New England in the late 1600s – every generation of Halls has had a member fight in some sort of war or conflict. Including

Lieutenant Commander Hall, who saw combat in Iraq if memory serves me, that's 10 generations of fighting Halls! Maybe the world is a dangerous place because the fighting Halls are in it!

But long before the fighting Halls, the world was still a dangerous place. We see this in the 31st Psalm which was written 3,000 years ago. Nearly every verse of the 31st Psalm alludes to some danger David faced.

- In verse 1 there is need of refuge and deliverance.
- In verse 2 there is need of rescue and salvation.
- In verse 4 he mentions a net hidden to entrap him.
- In verse 7 he mentions afflictions and adversities.
- In verse 8 he mentions his enemies.
- In verses 9-10 he mentions distress and grief, sorrow and sighing, failing strength and wasting health.
- In verse 11 he speaks of scornful adversaries and neglectful neighbors.
- In verse 13 he hears the whispering of many as they scheme against him and plot to take his life.
- In verse 15 he alludes again to enemies and to persecutors.
- In verse 18 he speaks of lying lips and insolent foes.
- In verse 20 he speaks of human plots and contentious tongues.
- In verse 21 he describes how he was beset as a city under siege.
- And in verse 22 he speaks of conditions that caused him alarm.

Yes, David lived in a dangerous world and so do we. But David served a dependable God and we do too because David's God is our God and he is the same yesterday, today, and forever!

Yes, you go into a dangerous world but you go with a dependable God. Eleven times in eight different verses, David paints a picture of God's dependability.

- In verses 2-3, God is described 4 times as a rock of refuge or a strong fortress – both of which are pictures of steadiness and reliability.
- In verse 5 David speaks of God's faithfulness.
- In verses 7, 16, and 21, David speaks of God's steadfast love – a dependable love that stands fast without moving or wavering.
- In the 19th verse David mentions God's abundant goodness.
- And in the 20th verse David says God is a sheltering presence.

One gets the sense from all of this that God can be counted on. Clearly, David was counting on God to see him through whatever danger or difficulty was driving him to his knees and pushing him to prayer. And like David, you can depend on God to see you through whatever danger or difficulty comes your way.

You can depend on God for at least three things. You can depend on him to shield you, lead you, and deliver you from evil. First, in many instances, God will shield you from dangers or difficulties. They may come close but they will not get you because you are hidden in the fortress of God's protective care. In the words of verse 2, he will be a rock of refuge and a strong fortress to save you. Yes, in many instances, God will shield you from dangers or difficulties – they may come close but they will not touch you.

Secondly, if God doesn't shield you then he will lead you through dangers or difficulties. They may surround you on every hand but God will show you what to do and he will guide you safely through. In the words of verse 3, you will pray, "...lead me and guide me (O Lord), take me out of the net that is hidden for me." And God will answer that prayer. He will lead you through dangers and difficulties until you are safe on the other side. And as a leader, you will lead others through them, too.

Finally, in addition to shielding and leading, God will deliver you from dangers or difficulties. And he will deliver you in one of two ways. He will either take you out or take you up. In many instances, God will pluck you out of dangers or difficulties. When all seems lost, God will intervene to take you out and set you down in a better place. Your experience will be like David's as described in verses 7-8 where David prayed to the Lord saying: "I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have taken heed of my adversities, and have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad place." That will be your experience on many an occasion. God will pluck you out of dangers or difficulties. When all seems lost, he will intervene to take you out and set you down in a better place.

But sometimes he won't take you out; instead, he'll take you up. Do the words of the 5th verse sound familiar? "Into your hands I commit my spirit." They should. They were uttered by Jesus from the cross of crucifixion. Did the Father fail his Son when he refused to take him out harm's way? No! He didn't take him out; instead he took him up! He led him through danger and took him up through resurrection and ascension to sit beside him on a throne in heaven.

Just as Jesus uttered those words, Stephen uttered similar words as he was being stoned by his enemies. Acts 7:59 says, "While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Moments prior, as an angry crowd surrounded and threatened him, Stephen, "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55)

Now the New Testament typically depicts Jesus as sitting at the right hand of his Father in heaven. Why then was he standing as Stephen was about to be stoned? He was standing because he was preparing to snatch Stephen up! In John 14:1-3, Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a

place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” As Stephen was about to be stoned, Jesus stood to his feet to receive Stephen into his presence and to reward him with a mansion above. Did God let Stephen down? No! He took Stephen up!

Midshipmen – Listen! You go into a dangerous world but you go with a dependable God. He is absolutely dependable. You can count on him. He will shield you. He will lead you. He will deliver you in the end. He’ll take you out or he’ll take you up so long as you do what David did; so long as you do what Jesus did; so long as you do what Stephen did; so long as you put your trust in him!

This brings me to my final point. As you graduate and receive your commission, you go into a dangerous world; you go with a dependable God; go out with a durable faith. A durable faith is a faith that endures. It’s a faith that clings to God no matter what.

David had a durable faith. The 31st Psalm is a Psalm of faith. David’s faith is demonstrated throughout the Psalm.

- In the 1st verse he says, “In you, O Lord, I seek refuge.”
- In the 3rd verse he says, “You are indeed my rock and my fortress.”
- In the 5th verse he says, “Into your hand I commit my spirit.”
- In the 6th verse he says, “I trust in the Lord.”
- In the 7th verse he says, “I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love.”
- In verses 14-15 he says, “I trust in you, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hand.”

He said all of this despite the fact that he was in grave danger and passing through a terrible trial as is evidenced by verses 9-13 where he speaks of distress and grief, sorrow and sighing, failing strength and wasting health, scornful enemies, neglectful neighbors, whispering crowds and plotting foes!

Yes, David had a durable faith – a faith that endured dangers and difficulties – a faith that clung to God through trials and troubles. As you go into a dangerous world with a dependable God, go out with a durable faith and you will triumph by and by. For the last two verses of this Psalm say, “Love the Lord, all you his saints. The Lord preserves the faithful...Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait (or hope, or trust) in the Lord.” One way or another, the Lord preserves the faithful. Strength and courage will be their lot.

Let me close with a true story from my own experience. Two years ago while I was deploying to Afghanistan, my plane stopped in Germany to take on fuel. Along with everyone else, I got off the plane and went into the terminal to wait while the aircraft was prepared for the second long leg of our journey. It was the middle of the night and aside from a small restaurant and a tiny gift shop, there was nothing to do but roam through the empty building. While doing so, I made a remarkable discovery.

Back in a dark and secluded corner of the airport, I found a beautiful little chapel tucked away all by itself. When I entered it, I was amazed at how lovely it was. Its walls were covered with paintings of angels, and an icon of Christ hung above the altar. But it wasn't just any old icon. It was the exact same icon that hung over the altar in the Naval Chaplains School where I was once stationed – an icon that always brought me comfort whenever I saw it. And as I sat in that little chapel, I realized that I had nothing to fear. Yes, I was going to war and I would be separated from my family for over a year, but I was surrounded by angels and accompanied by Christ. I knew I could depend on him come what may. I trusted him and it was enough for me. I left that little chapel with a calm assurance – an assurance that sustained me through the coming months – an assurance that never let me go – an assurance that brought me home. Strength and courage were my lot!

Graduating Midshipmen, in a few moments you will be afforded an opportunity to dedicate your commissions to God by signing the book of dedication. None are required to do so. But if you choose to sign it, may you do so as a demonstration of your sincere faith and your deep desire to cling to God as God himself clings to you.

Midshipmen, Class of 2014, parents, family members, friends, congregants, all, I close with the words of the 31st Psalm: “Love the Lord, all you his saints. The Lord preserves the faithful...Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord.” And all God's people said – Amen!