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I remember finding a fossil. I wasn't very old at the time, and I was fascinated to find a shape embedded in a rock. As my finger slowly traced the small rocky figure, I wondered how it had been created. How old was it? How long had it been resting in the dirt until I found it? Later I learned the process of a living organism, either a plant or animal, getting trapped in sediment. As the organism decayed, the shape remains imprinted in the mud and hardens, forming a fossil.

In Indiana, the most common fossils include marine brachiopods, which resemble clams. One might also find coral, which have been around for 400 million years.¹ Finding these fossils may seem odd since we don't live near an ocean, but discovering these fossils suggests that at one time our state was under water!

Although finding a fossil is exciting, just imagine discovering a petrosomatoglyph (pe·tro·so·ma·to·glyph)—an image of a body part of an animal or human embedded in rock, such as a footprint. “The word comes from the Greek πέτρα

(petra, "stone"), σῶμα (soma "body"), and γλύφειν (glyphein, "to carve"). Feet are the most common; however, other features including knees, elbows, hands, heads, and fingers are also found.”²

One can find these imprints all over the world, and through the centuries some people have attached symbolism to them, and the petrosomatoglyphs have been used in religious or secular ceremonies. Some shapes have even become associated with saints or heroes. For example, Christians and Muslims attribute a footprint on the top of a mountain in Sri Lanka to Adam, the first human recorded in the book of Genesis.

The Chapel of the Ascension in Jerusalem has a pair of footprints attributed to Jesus. Knee prints of Mary, the mother of Jesus, are said to be imprinted in Wales, along with her footprint and thumbprint nearby.

Why is it that we find these imprints in rock so fascinating? The writer of Psalm 71 might offer us a clue. The writer seemed to be in trouble from enemies, for he wrote “Rescue me, O my God, from

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the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel” and “my enemies speak concerning me, and those who watch for my life consult together.” The writer hoped that his enemies would be put to shame and disgrace. If this happened, the psalmist suggested that he would praise God all day long, singing praises with stringed instruments, and he would talk about the goodness of God.

The writer suggested that this rescue could happen as he addressed God in prayer:

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.
Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.

Along with a fossil, there’s something about a rock that feels solid, secure. I found that out this summer as I began building a sunroom on an existing concrete patio behind my house. To begin I had to set the posts several feet into the ground, but first I had to break through the concrete, which I discovered was very thick. It took me most of the

week to dig four holes and set the posts. I was tempted to skip this step and make the holes shallower since digging was so difficult, but I knew that being embedded in rock, these posts would be very secure.

Maybe that’s why the psalmist used the imagery of a rock—a rock of refuge, a strong fortress. We began worship this morning with a hymn based on this imagery. A few years ago Tonya Lanthron wrote about this song in a Lutheran Bible study:

The most well-known hymn of the Lutheran tradition, “*A Mighty Fortress is Our God*,” was written by Martin Luther. Luther was not a popular man during his lifetime, because he challenged the status quo of the church. Those who fight error and corruption within a system are seldom popular. Luther knew death threats, the outside influence of plague, and the personal agony of losing his own children, yet by the grace of God he was able to keep the faith and keep pointing others to Jesus and the truth of the written Word that has been given to us.

Jesus is our refuge, our fortress, our safe place. Nothing or no one else is a true refuge.³

This isn’t the only hymn that uses the imagery of a rock as a secure place. Can you think of another one?

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Pull out your hymnal and look at. This hymn begins and ends with the words “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.”

This hymn first appeared in the March, 1776, issue of the *Gospel Magazine*, of which the composer, Augustus Toplady, was the editor.

A British magazine once invited its readers to submit a list of the hundred English hymns that stood highest in their esteem. A total of 3,500 [people] responded, and “Rock of Ages” was named first by 3,215.⁴

The words echo the imagery of Psalm 71—a rock providing a place of safety, a shelter in a time of trouble.

Legend says that Toplady wrote the hymn during a stormy incident in England. While traveling along the gorge in Burrington Combe, he was caught in a fierce storm and took shelter in a gap in the gorge, where he wrote the original lyrics. Some disagree on whether the event actually occurred; nevertheless, the rock is now marked with a plaque that reads: “Rock of Ages: This rock derives its name from the well-known hymn written about 1762 by the Rev

A M Toplady who was inspired whilst sheltering in this cleft during a storm.”⁵

Think of those stormy times you’ve encountered, when life seemed uncertain, unpredictable, in chaos. Maybe you had to wait for what felt like forever to hear the results of medical tests. Or a friend turns on you and becomes what feels like an enemy. Or you voice your opinion about politics or your sexuality and suddenly you’re attacked for your views. In these difficult times of life, have you ever felt like crawling under a rock to hide?

Throughout history, those who have trusted in God have found security in the imagery of rocks, finding hope in the stories and impressions embedded in them. The stony footprint shapes and the stories of heroes remind us that God has been inspiring people for generations, offering safety for eons of time.

Even though you may not find a fossil or a petrosomatoglyph in your backyard, God does offer you a rock of refuge, a mighty fortress of safety, a rock of ages cleft for you.

¹ https://igws.indiana.edu/ReferenceDocs/Fossil_card.pdf

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrosomatoglyph>

³ <https://timothy.lutheranbiblestudy.com/2020/03/17/march-17-2020-jesus-our-rock-of-refuge-psalm-711-12/>

⁴ Ryden, Ernest Edwin. *The Story of Our Hymns*. Kindle Edition.

⁵ "The Story Behind the Hymn 'Rock of Ages,'" March 10, 2015, www.thetabernaclechoir.org/articles/rock-of-ages-history.html.