

ROCK SHADOW

by Anne Eggebroten

The hymn began with that heavy leaden drone typical of so many: "Beneath the cross of Jesus, I fain would take my stand...." Three times we took a solid stand on A-flat – then slid half a step down to G – then made a one-step daring leap to B-flat – and finally reached "Jee-sus" (A-flat again, sliding to F). I thought the hymn would never end.

But when we sang "The shadow of a mighty rock," I snapped to attention. Rock. Protection. A shiver went through my body, remembering the danger I had faced two weeks earlier.

It's not a good idea to start hiking in late afternoon, especially in Colorado where rainstorms materialize daily around 2 or 3 pm. It's also not a good idea to hike alone. But I had to drive back to California the next day, and my vacation had been mostly occupied by hosting friends and family in Telluride, where my grandparents had lived and where my family still kept a vacation home. The guests had left, and I had a few hours of the day to myself.

The woods beckoned, dark and deep, but an evening hike alone in that direction might not be safe. Instead I chose the jeep road that laces up the mountainside at the end of town like the string holding in a turkey's stuffing. There I would meet other hikers or jeeps; the town would be in full view at all times.

I drove to the end of the box canyon, parked, and charged up the switchbacks with delight in God's creation around me. Every step brought a new view of the waterfall at the right of the canyon, the sheer cliffs on both sides.

As I passed the top of Bridal Veil Falls, however, dark clouds hanging in the west suddenly blew in. Rain began, and half of the waterfall's spray was blown back over the top of the cliff. I pulled the poncho out of my backpack and walked on. The jeep road narrowed to a one-way track, and I stayed on the inside, close to the mountain, away from the sheer drop. By the time I reached Ingram Falls, the rain was strong and darkness was descending.

I rested on a rock bench next to the road, looking at the lights of town 2,500 feet below. I said to myself, "I can do this. I can sit here. I can walk back down." But then the message "Not safe – go back now" came through loud and clear. I obeyed and started walking carefully down, noticing that I was now cold as well as wet.

And then I heard a rock slide – a small avalanche.

"Duh," I said to myself. "Hiking in the rain beneath a whole mountainside of loose rocks isn't too smart." There were no trees or bushes – just rocks above and below me.

I continued to walk, now listening carefully, pausing where the road made the first U-turn to switch back in the opposite direction. No sounds except wind and rain, so I started down the next rock-paved section. Fifty jeeps bump down this road every day in the summer, but no one thinks about telling tourists to watch out for falling rock. And suddenly I heard a few more rocks skipping down the nearly vertical mountainside. I was in a chute – I began running as fast as I could without stumbling on the steep downward road. Two or three rocks clattered behind me, and I saw one twenty feet in front of me bouncing from the hillside, to the road, to somewhere below.

Reaching the shelter of a large rock outcropping, I covered there, listening. Then I carefully ran to the end of the switchback, which had a tree or two. From then on I paused in what I thought were the safer places – a large overhang or a

clump of trees – and walked quickly through the chute areas, where rockslides were most likely.

When I got to the foot of Bridal Veil, there were lots of trees. A couple in an SUV appeared and gave me a ride down to my car. It was dark and still raining. Soon I was back in my house, exhausted and grateful.

Two weeks passed, and the scary hike remained tucked away like a postcard – until I sat in church and sang about being in the shelter of a mighty rock.

I smiled. Suddenly I had a new appreciation for the cross of Jesus: "A home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way..."

Whether we need shade from the noontide heat of our busy lives, or from the flying rocks of chance that catch us unaware, Jesus is there for us. As Elizabeth C. Clephane wrote in 1872, God's presence can be the shelter, the difference between life and death.

Anne Eggebroten writes from Santa Monica CA.

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Your Call is Our Call

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Behold, I make all things new!

