

One Refuge, One Vine, One God
Based on Psalm 16 & John 15:1-8

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on Feb. 22, 2026

Today, as we come to the first Sunday of Lent, we are beginning a six-week series on the Psalms. Hopefully, you have started to get your feet wet with the Psalms, thanks to the “40 Psalms in 40 Days” devotional path we’re undertaking as a congregation. It’s not too late to jump in and join us. We’ve got the list of daily Psalms along with the questions for each over in Ransom Hall.

The Psalms constitute the prayer book for ancient Israel, giving us a profoundly personal look at the issues our faith ancestors were tackling between 500 and a thousand years before the time of Jesus. The Hebrews’ lives were not easy in those years. They faced persecution, exile, attacks from nearby nations, and some truly unjust and ungodly leaders. Because of these terrifying challenges, one theme we encounter in many of the 150 Psalms is the theme of refuge, seeking a place or a means to be safe.

That was the chief concern of the writer of Psalm 16. “Keep me safe, my God, for in You I take refuge.” As the psalm unfolds, there is a clear indication that other gods and other paths are available as refuge as well. But the writer affirms that the other paths are not reliable. In fact, these other paths and other gods bring additional suffering. Verse 4 says that “Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more,” and that “Apart from You, O God, I have no good thing.”

As I’ve been going through a rather dark time, I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about Psalm 16 and this idea of refuge. Where do I turn – I mean, really turn – to feel safe, loved, secure...? I think when we modern folks read Old Testament passages about avoiding other gods, we quickly assume that “other gods” mean other religions – non-Christian paths like Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, or even New Age spirituality. And because we don’t “go after” or practice those other faiths, we conclude that we are not going after “other gods.” But as Coach Lee Corso used to say every Saturday on College Game Day – “Not so fast!”

When it comes to seeking refuge in 2026, other gods for us can take a wide variety of non-religious forms. I watched my dad seek refuge in a bottle for his entire adult life. That was his other god, his chosen refuge. I have other relatives and close friends who have taken refuge in their work, their professions. Work-a-holism is a particularly prominent ‘false god’ in this country that values wealth, prestige, and the accumulation of material possessions. With the explosion of home and online shopping in recent decades, this kind of ‘retail therapy’ is

another increasingly prominent form of seeking refuge in other gods – making your home just right, having closets and dressers full of things you rarely even wear. And when I look at my own life, I have to wonder if I've tended to seek refuge in a relationship with a woman. I've often found my primary sense of security and safety in whether I was dating or married to someone.

Now, do you know what all these other gods have in common...? They don't satisfy. They don't deliver. They don't offer security or reliable refuge. In fact, as Psalm 16 promises, "Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more." Part of what the writer of Psalm 16 is telling us here is that God is the only reliable refuge. As verse 2 puts it, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing." It's not that God will somehow punish us for the other gods and other places we seek refuge in. It's that we will produce far more pain and suffering for ourselves as a result of the natural consequences that come with the lesser gods we have put our faith in.

My dad wasn't punished by God for his alcoholism. The natural consequences of his choice of alcohol as his primary refuge was punishment enough – broken family relationships, job loss, a huge loss of bodily health and organ function, not to mention the people he hurt while driving drunk. My friends who seek refuge in their retail therapy and constant home improvement projects never reach a point of satisfaction or security. They bounce from project to project, from purchase to purchase and never get off that treadmill. And as I found out during the ice storm, all the home improvement in the world can't stand up when 5 trees fall on your house. As one who has gone through multiple divorces and break-ups, a supposedly committed relationship with someone who says that she loves you offers no real or lasting security. They are false gods like everything else on this list.

And that brings us to what Jesus says in John 15." I am the vine and you are the branches. IF you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. But apart from me," Jesus says, "you can do nothing..." This is one of Jesus's most direct, most in-your-face teachings. The vine and branches metaphor is so clear. Once a branch is cut off from its vine – its life source – it literally cannot survive. It shrivels up and dies. Jesus is doing everything he can to convince us *not* to go after lesser gods, false, insecure forms of refuge that will actually leave us worse off than we were before we went to them.

The more I think about this, the more I find myself going all the way back to the very first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." I really think we have completely missed the point of this admonition. Maybe it was the

first and most important command because God loves us SO much that She wanted to save us from all of the excess suffering, sadness, and pain that She knew would result from our putting our trust, our security, and our hearts into all the things that can never deliver, never come through for us, never offer genuine, reliable, and lasting refuge.

Friends, when I look at my life, it has become abundantly clear that I have repeatedly sought refuge and security in lesser gods, in people and relationships that are NOT the vine of Christ. And I don't think God carries one iota of judgment toward me for doing that, any more than I think God holds any judgment against my late father. But what I do think is that God must be incredibly sad and frustrated that we don't trust Him and repeatedly create so much unnecessary suffering for ourselves by putting our faith and trust in people and things that will never deliver, never hold up, never provide security, never provide the genuine, lasting refuge that God wants so badly to give to us.

Listen again to Psalm 16...

Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge."

I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing."

I say of the holy people who are in the land,

"They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight."

Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more...

LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup; you alone make my lot secure.

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;

surely I have a delightful inheritance.

I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.

I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure,

because You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,

nor will You let your faithful one see decay.

You have made known to me the path of life; You will fill me with joy in your

presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Do you hear the trust in the Psalm? Can you sense how certain the speaker is that God is good, that God loves, and that God will not forsake or abandon his children?

So what is going on in your life right now that is making you feel insecure? Is it your body and declining health, or maybe the health of a loved one...? Is it your

finances and a bank account that dwindles as expenses continue to rise...? Is it the increased fragility of your marriage or relationships...? Is it your job that no longer satisfies or motivates or provides you with the living you always wanted and imagined for yourself...? Or perhaps you find yourself alone right now and unattached, feeling adrift without a stable partner or spouse...? For many of us, it could well be America's volatile and violent political climate that has us feeling insecure and unsettled. ALL of these situations create the need for a refuge, a place to go that will NOT let us down.

Know this – plenty of lesser gods will cry out to you at such a time as this. The siren songs of lesser vines will make their false promises and claims when you are alone and weak. Your mind will play tricks on you, saying things like, “Well, if you could just a little more money...If you just learned to relax and have a few drinks...If you just met someone new to spend time with...If you just made your living space a bit better or got yourself some more creature comforts....If you could just close this next big deal at work...” These are the cries and claims of false gods, while Jesus quietly whispers, “I am the vine and you are the branches...If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit...But apart from me, you can do nothing.”

So the real question for us as we move more deeply into Lent is how do we stay connected to the Vine of Christ? The 40 Psalms in 40 days devotion opportunity we're offering can help. Our Wednesday evening Lenten gatherings can help. Spending time in prayer and scripture can help. I've actually started a bible plan where I listen to 4-5 chapters a night on my phone when I can't sleep. I'm also finding that regular, concrete, intentional acts of service toward others is a profound and powerful way of staying connected to the vine, for we know that Jesus did these very things, right?

I'll give the last word to Psalm 16. “Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure...I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right, I will not be shaken.” Amen.