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"Don't Fall!" The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (9/10/2023, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

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Let us pray. Almighty God, me the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.

One of the great things about my kids getting a little bit older is that the shows get better, that we get to watch together. So we sort of we've moved past how you, you know, which stinks, right? And we've gotten into watching some better things. And so last week, my middle child picked out a documentary on Disney plus called free solo. And some of you may know this story. This is a story about a climber named Alex Honnold. And he's gotten to the point where he's among the most elite climbers in the world, in that he can climb what they call free solo, without any ropes, and basically just using his hands and his feet, and he can climb these sheer cliff walls this way. And so the film is actually about him taking on El Capitan in Yosemite, National Park, 3000 foot granite, almost just solid sheet. And it is astounding and amazing to watch. And one of the things that struck me about the way that Alex approaches his craft, and it is a craft, you know, he keeps a notebook. And he's got about 50, to 70 different moves that are involved, as he makes these a sense. And he plots out with intricate detail, every move that has to be made to ascend the cliff. And so at one point, you're watching him, and he's sort of talking out loud about what he's doing. And, you know, you think it's just kind of like this, right. But there's a certain sort of thing or hold, you have to do at this point, and then you have to roll over. And then you can either do the karate kick, or you can do the other move, and he's analyzing all of this as he's going. And it's really amazing. And, of course, the reason he has to do this, is that if he messes up one time, that's it. There's no coming back from it, right? If he falls, there's no coming back from what will happen to him. That's it, it's over. And so you might imagine that the documentary helps to create this incredible sense of suspense and drama, as we're watching this guy. And, you know, I we're not finished with it yet. I assume that

he's going to make it because I told the kids I said, I don't think they would have finished the documentary and put it out if he doesn't, so I'm just gonna assume that that happens. But I was thinking about this too, as a way that sometimes we think that religion works. We think that it is a matter of technique. It is a matter of mastering the right techniques in the right order. And if we fall, that's it. It's over. We're done for God is watching us and waiting for us to trip up, so that God can tell you, I told you so. It reminds me of another famous quotes, I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger, those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know I am the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you. That is not in the Bible, by the way. That is from Pulp Fiction. So I hope you weren't worried there for a minutes from Pulp Fiction. It's almost the 30th anniversary of this film. This violent, funny and witty Quentin Tarantino film that showed up and never at nearly every verbal interaction of my senior year of high school. Right, there was a quote from Pulp Fiction. The character Jules Winnfield, Hitman played brilliantly by Samuel L. Jackson would say this before executing his targets in an effort to justify his actions, right to sort of put a black and white moral order on what it was in, in reality, much more ambiguous, the sort of profession that he was involved in, right, but he would say this to sort of make him feel better, and that what he was doing was justified within a sort of black and white world. There were bad guys, and there were good guys. And even though he appeared to be a bad guy, he was really a good guy, because he was taking care of the bad guys. This quote is, as I said before, not in Scripture, it is not in the Bible. It is made up by Quentin Tarantino, and I think it was made up this way because it sounds like something he thought would have been in the Bible. And in particular, it sounds like something that he would have thought is the Old Testament God Ooh, Old Testament God, you know this guy? Yeah, he's really mean, Old Testament God is mean and angry and violence and wrathful and punishing, Old Testament, God is bad. He's out to get us and the New Testament God comes along, and everything is great. Because New Testament God is totally chill. He wears Birkenstocks. You know, New Testament, God, you know, is just Jesus kind of walking around just forgiving people and stuff. And it's great. This is, of course, a theological error, right? It is to suggest that we have these two gods in Scripture, and one of them is, is bad, and one of them is good. And the church actually condemned this teaching in the year 144. That's not very long after the church started. And the church realized that this was not what the church should be teaching about Jesus Christ and His relationship to God, the Father. But people still believe this today. And I think we believe it because it's easy, and it provides a nice and tidy box that we can put our faith into and God in Scripture, and maybe at some level, it's because you know, Old Testament, God is sort of what we would do if we were in charge. We would love to smite some people, right? But the truth is not nice and tidy and neat. It never is. And so what I want to tell you today is that it is actually good news, that we don't have these two different

gods Old Testament and New Testament God, that that's good news, and that it actually does matter to for the way that we live our lives. So here we go. There are in fact, many passages of Scripture in the Old Testament that show God as intimately loving and patients, a fountain of goodwill, like a like a loving mother, doting on her children, like a shepherd, guiding his sheep through the valley of death, like a repentant disciplinarian, and like a lover who cannot spend enough time and energy on the beloved. And there are many passages of Scripture in the New Testament in which Jesus says puzzling or confusing things or just shows emotion is human. He laughs He cries, he gets angry. And this is good news. Because when God becomes human, God embraces all of life, all of human experience, including anger, including frustration, including conflicts, God knows intimately what it is like to be part of this roller coaster ride, we call the human condition. And we forget this, we want to imagine Jesus God in the flesh as this static portrait is passive, as placid as undisturbed. And we forget that Jesus is a real person, and that scriptures were written by real people with real lives in real communities. And those real people with real lives and real communities had real struggles. Just like Jesus, just like Ezekiel, the prophet, a real person who feels a real responsibility for the real people that God has given him to shepherd. And a times that sense of responsibility weighs on him. And like a loving parents to his flock, he pronounces a word of judgment, a word that sounds angry, and harsh. Just as if my child were about to run into the busy streets, I would pronounce a word that is angry, and harsh, as well. Anger is a natural reaction to the things that happen around us, especially those acts of profound violence or injustice that seem to punctuate our lives on a regular basis. And we often call this kind of anger, righteous anger, because it's not the kind of anger that erupts when we stub our toe. Which happened to me yesterday, by the way, which is fun because I had written the sermon before that happens, right? But then it happened to me and I was angry, or when we end up leaving the house late for work because of the toilet needed plunging. Also a thing that happened to me recently, and made me angry. Or even when we find out that someone in the pickleball text chat was making fun of us behind our back.

I don't think that one's happened to me, but I guess I wouldn't know. These are all ways of being angry, but they relate to us and how we personally experienced injury or stress or insult but righteous anger, or we might also call it prophetic. Anger is something always simmering under the surface of our lives. And I think that God puts it there for a reason. It surfaces when we see some kind of injustice in the world that needs correcting or when we experience the needless suffering of God's creatures due to the deliberately evil acts of other people. So this desire is deeply planted within us. And it's deeply implanted in the scriptures. When we see Ezekiel and other prophets speaking harshly and using language that seems a little too old testament it for us, this is what is actually happening, a passionate desire for the world to be something other than what it

often seems to be. And the prophets are great at this sort of thing. They use their imagination to envision a different world a different way of being, than the world in which people exist only to when imagining a world in which cooperation is possible in which grace is possible in which God loves, even the losers. Even the outcasts, even the failures, even you, even me, a desire for the kingdom of God to come, as Jesus will say, and the Lord's Prayer on earth, as it is already in heaven, a desire for God's reign to extend over the earth so that those things which so often disappoint us and frustrate us, and anger us about this world will cease to exist. And so what is wonderful about the Old Testament and what we so often miss, and it's Tarantino is ation is that God has a wonderful imagination. God's desire is for us to live. God's desire for God's people is consistent throughout the Holy Scriptures, it is for God's people to live. Now, how do we do that? If I could give you three easy tips, preferably all starting with the same letter and rhyming, that told you exactly what it takes to live and to thrive and to flourish in this world, I would do it all. I would, I would help you out. I wouldn't just keep it to myself, I promise. But that isn't how it works. Exactly. Because life is messy and complicated. Because conflict does exist. As Matthew reminds us today, even in the church, because we do compete, we make life out to be a competition with winners and losers, because anger and frustration and disappointment are all around us. And so what we do know and what I can tell you is that God knows. God knows all of these things, God in Jesus Christ has experienced and felt all of these things. What we do know is that God is infinitely compassionate, patient loving and kind. What we know is that God is not waiting to strike us down when we fail. God is not just rubbing his god hands and heaven itching for the chance to condemn us. Look again at what the prophet Ezekiel says, As I live, says, The Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live, turn back, turn back from your evil ways. For Why will you die, oh, House of Israel. And I got a PhD in literature just so I could tell you today this one thing that when someone says something twice in a row, you should pay attention to it. Thank you, all that work is now fulfills, turn back, turn back. For Why will you die Oh, House of Israel, I imagine Ezekiel crying out in the corners of the cities of the ancient world, something he would just as easily cry out in our cities, Why will you die? God wants you to live. It's a cry born out of Ezekiel his own real life, his own real circumstances, his own imagining of a God who actually does care about what happens to us, the God who sees us choosing death, over and over again. And yet a God who wants us to live the record of Scripture, the whole thing is a record of a living God who sees and laments that God's children are choosing the way that leads to death. And so God does something about it. God leads those wayward children to the way of life he leads them through the Red Sea to life. On the other side, he leads us through the waters of baptism, to life on the other side. And when we can't seem to follow in that way of life consistently, God then becomes the very way that leads to life in Jesus Christ, then

offers grace and mercy and pardon to all freely and abundantly with no expectation of return. What we get wrong and why it matters. When we talk about Old Testament God and New Testament God is this we imagine that God is like us, that God rewards the winners and punishes the losers. And so we have to keep pleasing God we have to get it Right, we can never make a false step. We have to do the right thing so that God will see us and reward us. He Paul says in Romans two Oh, no one anything except love, to owe no one anything except love, all that we have as a gift. Our lives, our friends, our families, our material goods, our relationships, our failures, our successes, all of it is a gift from God. And so our efforts to divide and conquer, to simplify and classify to box up our faith. So that always acts and behaves just the way we want it to, will always fail. And when they do, God invites us all to rest, to rest in God's love and grace and mercy to rest in God's invitation to step off the treadmill of climbing and striving and winning, to be real and to be human and to know that God's desire is for us to live. And when we fall off that cliff, to know that God is there to catch us, every time Amen.