

Summer in Psalms

“God is Our Refuge and Strength”

[Psalm 46](#)

This is the third week of our Summer in Psalms series. Psalm 46, which we have just read, contains some of the most familiar verses from the Bible, let alone the Book of Psalms. According to Google, Psalm 46 has two verses in the top 10 most popular verses from the Book of Psalms. As you may have guessed, the verses are: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” and “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Psalm 46 can be a great song of comfort, particularly for a nation that has suffered tragedy and is grieving. Several years ago, this psalm drew national attention when President Obama referenced it in the speech he delivered at the memorial service honoring the victims of the Tucson shooting. Then, just 9 months later, the President cited the psalm in its entirety at a memorial service marking the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on our country.

Filled with robust expression of trust in God and vivid images of God’s presence, power, and protection, Psalm 46 has sustained people of faith in difficult moments of their lives. One of those individuals was Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation and the founder of the Lutheran Church. In times of trouble, Luther would always turn to the Psalms for solace and strength, often singing them. Whenever he was discouraged in the face of extreme opposition to the Reformation movement he had helped spark, he would invite his friends to sing with him his favorite psalm, #46.

Later, inspired by this psalm, he wrote the song that we sang together in the beginning of our worship service: “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” We, the United Methodists, do not sing this hymn much in our worship services because of the strong war images contained in its lyrics. However, it is one that you often hear the Lutherans singing.

In the beginning of the psalm, the psalmist makes a bold, declarative statement about God: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” How comforting and reassuring words they are! He continues, “Therefore, we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.” We recognize that the psalmist here is talking about natural disasters, like earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods.

Actually, when we hear the names of these natural disasters, we cringe because we know how devastating they can be. In California, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake claimed about 3,000 lives and destroyed 80% of the city. The 1994 Los Angeles earthquake resulted in 57 deaths and about 20 billions dollars in damage. Mudslides in Freetown, Sierra Leone killed nearly 500 people, including the relatives of some of our church members. And, 2 weeks after the tragedy, it’s reported that over 800 people are still missing. Just this weekend, we have seen the impact of another powerful hurricane hitting our shores, with the city of Houston and other areas in Southeast Texas bracing for pummeling rainfalls and devastating floods.

Though I have not experienced any major natural disasters personally, I have witnessed the devastation they left behind. Several years ago, a tornado swept through neighboring towns, knocking down many

houses and trees. It was frightening even just seeing the devastation up close, driving through the areas affected by the deadly winds.

Over 10 years ago, about a year after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, I had an opportunity to go on a mission trip to New Orleans to help with the recovery work. 80 percent of the whole city had been flooded by the hurricane. I remember how eerie it was driving through the areas of the city affected by it at night, seeing so many houses and buildings sitting in total darkness. The devastation was so massive that, even twelve years later, the recovery work is still on-going. I am glad that our church also participated in the recovery effort by sending a team of 43 volunteers to New Orleans several years ago.

We do not know who wrote Psalm 46 and on what occasion it was written. But, we can assume that the psalm was composed when the nation was in great danger, facing some impending calamity where the city of Jerusalem, as the center of worship, was under siege by its enemies -- when the world around the psalmist was falling apart. In times of such hardship and trouble, the psalmist had the courage to declare the source of protection and strength for him and his nation would be in God, and God alone.

Even though troubles and hardships were increasing, even though the very foundations of the earth were being shaken, with the mountains tumbling and carried into the sea, even though foreign nations were roaring and threatening the destruction of their kingdom, the Israelites placed their trust in God, who would protect them. In the midst of chaos, they were reminded that with God as their refuge, they had nothing to fear. The only thing within their control was to stay calm and to bear witness to the mighty works God was doing ever-presently.

The psalmist invites us to come and behold, how God is removing the instruments of war, bringing wars to an end in every corner of the world. Notice that this is not solely for the benefit of the Israelites. It is so that God might be exalted among the *nations* and throughout the *earth*, in all of creation.

According to biblical scholars, it is possible that psalm 46 is a commemoration of the invasion of the land of Israel by the Assyrian Empire, and the victory the Israelites won in their war against the invading foreign army. The circumstances of the invasion and subsequent victory are recorded in the books of 2 Kings (17-19), 2 Chronicles, and Isaiah (36-37) and seem to fit with the illustrations contained in the psalm.

At that time, the Israelites were divided into two nations - the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The Assyrian Empire invaded and easily defeated Israel. Several years later, the Assyrians proceeded to destroy Judah. Though the king of Judah did everything possible to withstand the assault, all the cities of Judah were captured by the Assyrian army, and only the city of Jerusalem was left. People were filled with great fear.

In the bleakness of this situation, the prophet Isaiah delivered God's words of promise to them: "The king of Assyria will not enter this city. He will not shoot a single arrow here. He will not come near the city with a shield. He will not build a ramp to besiege it. He will go back by the same way he came. He will not enter this city."

And, behold, God kept this promise. The Israelites did not have to fight a battle over Jerusalem! As recorded in the 37th chapter of the book of Isaiah, the Assyrian army indeed had to retreat back the same way they had come. A new dawn revealed to the city and its residents that they were all saved. What a miraculous victory!

Yet, their victory did not last forever. Ultimately, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire, and so was the Temple in the city. The king of Judah, along with his royal family and the officials of his court were taken into exile. Of course, the destruction of Jerusalem, especially, the Holy Temple traumatized the Israelites. They had believed that God would always protect them and save them from the hands of their enemies because they were God's chosen people. So, they were left confused and disoriented.

In the long period of the Babylonian exile and captivity, from a place of deep sorrow and despair, the Israelites began to question and reexamine their faith and religious practices. Arising out of the ashes came a new truth about the God they worshipped:

God cannot be bound to a place. As the Creator of the world, God is everywhere. God was with us in our homeland, and God is still with us here in foreign land. And, God is with the people we left behind in our homeland, too. God has been with us always and will continue to be with us, in both good times and times of trouble. Through all the hardships of our lives, God has been our refuge and strength and will continue to be so in the future!

Yet, as their history shows, again and again, whenever a new crisis would arise, the Israelites fell back into their old habits of taking refuge in things other than their God.

Like the ancestors of our faith, we too find ourselves taking refuge in things other than our God. We take refuge in our youth and health, in our knowledge and skillsets, in our bank accounts and investments, in our jobs and positions of power, in our connections and networks. We take refuge in politics, dividing people into us and them categories. We take refuge in the promises of our political leaders. We take refuge in the economic and military power of our nation.

But, the truth about these refuges is that they cannot guarantee the security of our lives. There is nothing under the sun in this whole world that can completely secure our lives: not our health, our wealth, not even our relationships with our family and friends are reliable enough to serve as true refuges.

What are we to do then when we face our troubles, when our lives are under siege? The psalmist tells us to be still, to be quiet, and know that God is God. In other words, stop talking and listen; stop doing and just practice being; stop moving about and seek God in the stillness because God is there, ever-present, as our help, whether in times of great despair or great fortune. It is a radical call because it demands of us to completely trust in God and fully rely on God's power instead of our own strength.

Being still does not mean that we close our eyes to our troubles and sufferings of people around us. But, it means that, in the midst of all that threatens us, we maintain peace in our hearts by remaining in communion with God. Through this union, we know that come what may, we walk in God's presence, power, and protection.

The Message Bible translates verse 10 this way: "Step out of the traffic! Take a long loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything!" Whenever my grandson Gabriel looks at me with his loving gaze, my heart leaps with joy, and I feel like I can do anything for the little guy, even giving up my own life, if I need to! How greater and more perfect this joy must be for God, when the created looks upon the Creator with the singleness and fullness of our being.

Friends, I believe it is the love of God who is with us here and now and in all the circumstances of our lives, especially in times of trouble when we are faced with our greatest needs. So why should we fear? The

Holy One who is in all and through all and above all through our Lord Jesus Christ says, "Be still and know that I am God."

Thanks be to God!