

Psalm 46

Be Still

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*Will you join me in this responsive reading of Psalm 46?

¹God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; ³though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will be her help when dawn arrives.

⁶The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; The Divine voice breaks in; the earth melts.

⁷The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

⁸Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations God has brought on the earth.

⁹God makes wars cease to the end of the earth; breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; God burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

¹¹The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Psalm 46 is a particularly beloved psalm, the inspiration for Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Perhaps one reason Luther and others have loved this psalm is that it steadfastly proclaims faith in God's protection and presence, even while being highly realistic about the way things actually are in the world. The opening themes of divine refuge and help in this psalm address one of the thorniest theological problems of any age: Where is God in times of real trouble? The answer, that God is an ever-present help in trouble, is not perfectly self-evident in human experience. Children die, wars persist, hurricanes ravage communities and entire islands, fires destroy hundreds of acres, suffering does not seem to subside. Under such circumstances, how can we possibly understand God to be refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble?

I don't know about you, but I have been asked this question, or a version of it, more times than I can count. "How can we believe God is ultimately good when all of these bad things are happening?" One response to this question, that I have encountered, is that God created human beings with free will and we, being ultimately sinful, cause the bad things to happen. So, it's not God's fault, it's ours. My problem with that response is that it sounds as if God is now absent...like God *created* and now just sort of hangs out, watching us mess things up. I don't believe that. You see, I don't understand how it happened, but somehow God created...using gravity, gases and clumps of dust over billions of years, the world evolved and eventually became the world we live in today (see what I did there...science isn't a threat to our faith) and now God is just kind of a spectator? I don't know about you, but that way of thinking about God doesn't resonate with me. So, how can we believe God is ultimately good when all of these bad things are happening?

As people of faith, we ought to wrestle with this question. We ought to wrestle with it because wrestling with it equips us to respond to the

world's suffering, and our own suffering, in ways that are life-giving and that make sense within our own theological framework. In our wrestling, we will not all come to the same conclusions because we don't all believe the same things about the Bible, about God, and about the world, but I think the topic is timely, so, let's wrestle with it through the lens of Psalm 46.

Psalm 46 is one of a group of psalms called the Songs of Zion. These psalms give voice to the people's fondness for Jerusalem as God's dwelling place. This reflects what scholars call "royal Zion theology." This theology held that God chose Jerusalem as God's holy city and the family of David to rule on behalf of God. The visible signs of God's presence in Jerusalem were Solomon's temple on Mount Zion, and within the temple, the ark of God. Although Christians do not view Jerusalem as the symbolic focus of God's presence and power as the psalmist does, that concrete and particularistic way of thinking is not entirely foreign to Christianity. For the early followers of Jesus, Jesus Christ became what the Temple had once represented. Indeed, Jesus became the new locus of God's presence and power to the degree that the Gospel of John can say, "the Word became flesh." Jesus was Emmanuel, "God is with us." And as we read the stories and teachings of Jesus, we can see that the fundamental message Jesus proclaimed and embodied about the kingdom of God is essentially the same as that of Psalm 46: We can depend on God for our security. God is for us and is the ultimate source of our strength and hope.

*If the temple and the ark of God were visible signs of God's presence in Jerusalem, and Jesus was a visible sign of God's presence for his early followers, what are the visible signs of God's presence in our world today? In your life, what can you point to and say, "God is here?"

(Congregation responses)

I wonder, on what basis do we decide these things are visible signs of the presence of God? If I had to guess, I would say we decide based on the stories and teachings of Jesus. And in verse after verse of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we read about the importance that Jesus placed on loving people, caring for others, on creating...creating community and hope and beauty, and bringing about a world where vulnerability is valued over wealth and power. As followers of the ways of Jesus, we see God breaking into the world whenever we see love, compassion, kindness, justice, peace, unity, and inclusion.

These ways we see God breaking into the world today compare easily to the ways in which the psalmist describes God's activity in the world. "8Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations God has brought on the earth." God, bringing "desolations" doesn't seem to match the ways in which we have expressed experiencing God's presence in the world, in fact bringing "desolations" seems quite the opposite from the ways of Jesus. But the psalmist clarifies in the next verse, "9God makes wars cease to the end of the earth; breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; God burns the shields with fire." Upon close inspection, "desolations" prove anything but violent. They are sheer disarmament. God "breaks the bow...shatters the spear...burns shields with fire, destroying not armies, but armaments. God breaks in and stops human beings from destroying one another and the world God created.

*And at that moment, in the psalm, the divine voice breaks in, "Be still, and know that I am God." For many of us, this often-quoted phrase brings forth images of reverent contemplation, quiet nature scenes, and relaxation.

*In fact, on the wall in the church office, there is a painting of a hammock on a lovely, inviting porch. Written on the painting is, "Be still and know that I am God." I brought it with me from my office in IL and

it's one of my favorite paintings. It was also my initial choice as the picture on the front of the bulletin.

As I read and considered the original text, I learned that "Be Still" is not a good interpretation of the original Hebrew. Read in light of verse 9 before it, a better interpretation is, "Stop," or "Pay attention". It's a call to be hyper alert to God's way and God's activity in the world. With that in mind, I set about looking for a more appropriate picture for the bulletin. When I thought about what it looks like to be hyper alert, pay attention, to put down our tendencies for destruction, the picture currently on the front of the bulletin came to mind.

Psalm 46's affirmation of God's sovereignty and God's will for peace among all people, as well as Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God is what theologians call eschatological. Eschatology is the part of theology that deals with death and the final destiny of human beings. So, what I am saying is that because the world does not seem to be one in which a good, loving God is in charge and the world does not seem to be a place where peace prevails, both the psalm and Jesus' talk of the reign of God must be about something other than our lived experiences right now or at any time in human history. I believe, ultimately, all human beings will reside in a place where it is clear that peace and love have prevailed.

But what about now? This eschatological way of thinking calls us to a decision: Shall we see the world as the sphere of God's rule or not? Like the days of the psalmist and Jesus, today we too must recognize God's sovereignty in the world. We are tempted more than ever to believe our security rests on ourselves, or our possessions, or our government, or the technology of our weapons. In fact, all over the world, governments, including our own, justify repressive and destructive activities in the name of national security. Only these days, it's not bows, spears, and shields, but tanks, submarines, drones, nuclear missiles and border walls. And now more than ever, we can picture the worst-case scenario because versions of it play out on our 24-hour

news channels. Faced with this decision to rely on ourselves for security or God, Psalm 46 tells us that our security lies in the presence and power of God. Our security lies in the moments like the ones we named earlier, the moments we see God breaking into a world that seems not to acknowledge the ways of God.

As people of God, we are called to pay attention to the ways God is making Godself known in the world. It is in the demonstrations and work of love, justice, peace, compassion, unity, and inclusion that we can find our hope and our faith in a God that is ultimately good. Simply, it is in other human beings that we become convinced of the existence of a God who is "...our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble," even in the face of a reality that tempts us toward despair.

*So, for me, the answer to the question, "How can we believe God is ultimately good when all of these bad things are happening," is that I believe God is good because I have experienced human beings, made in the image of God, to be very good. I believe God is with us because God is in us. I have watched human beings resist injustice, show compassion to strangers, choose to give up fighting, stand with the vulnerable ones, and sacrifice their own comfort for the sake of others. Friends, in Psalm 46, in the stories and teachings of Jesus, and all over in the world today, there is hope and there is God. Perhaps, the best thing we can do for the world today is recognize that "God within us" in one another and work together to show the world that, in times of trouble, in times of joy, in all times, God is here. We are never alone. Amen.