

Prayer, Perspective and Peace

Matthew 8:23-27 Psalm 46

Psalm 46 New Revised Standard Version

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- ⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
- ⁶ The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice; the earth melts.
- ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
- ⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
- ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he 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."
- ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

This is the word of the Lord.

The past few weeks I've been cleaning out books, files, some things in our garage, (bit by bit) and have come across some treasures from years gone by. All

this got me thinking of some of the changes I've experienced in my 60 years. For example, I remember (as a kid) when my folks bought a new car with a brand-new feature: a built-in 8 track tape player! Remember those? And now look where we are, technology-wise!

Many of you have experienced a lot more change in your life than I have, and have witnessed a lot of change in the world. And think of all that we, collectively, are experiencing right now, in the world, and in our country. But even pre-pandemic, we had been living through, and will continue to live through, a time of significant change, transition, and upheaval. I went to a conference in the early 2000's where the presenter called it a "cultural tsunami."

This all feels new to us, however, so let's put this into historical perspective. Once a year or so I like to remind us of this quote by management guru Peter Drucker, who I think said it best (and in succinct terms)—on screen:

"Every few hundred years in western history there occurs a sharp transformation. Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself—its world view; its basic values; its social and political structures; its arts; its key institutions. Fifty years later there is a new world. And the people born then cannot even imagine the world in which their grandparents lived and into which their parents were born. We are currently living through just such a transition."

He wrote this 30 years ago, in 1993!

Along the same lines, but specific to the church, here is another quote from church historian Phyllis Tickle (next slide):

“Every 500 years the Church cleans out its attic and holds a giant rummage sale.”

There is a lot that is in transition in churches, while the world undergoes its seismic shift. And the covid pandemic accelerated this shift.

One of the points of sharing this (again) is to remind us that in the grand scheme of things, there isn't really anything new happening today that hasn't happened before, in its own way. The world has always gone through seismic shifts, and the church has always gone through times of change and upheaval, and the rise and emergence of something new out of these transitions.

All of the change and transition **is** new to **us**. But in the grand scheme of things, there isn't any change, upheaval, political kerfuffle, scandal, war, or natural disaster that hasn't happened before, which means there isn't anything that God hasn't seen or handled before. God is not freaking out! God is not wringing his hands, saying, “What in the world is going on?!?!? What am I going to do about all of this???!?” Like Jesus in the boat with the disciples. He wasn't freaked out by the storm. He seemed more concerned that *the disciples* were freaking out! Jesus was not afraid; the God of the wind and the waves, of people and politics, the God of history is present and brings peace.

This is what I want us to receive this morning—the understanding that God is present and active and, well, not freaked out by anything that’s going on. We can trust God, and experience God’s presence and peace in the midst of it.

Because into these times of change and upheaval and crisis and clashing of nations and people, the Psalmist speaks and says, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. **Therefore we will not fear**, though the earth should change...”

Is the earth changing? Of course; in many ways. And the psalm, even though written around the 9th century BC, acknowledges that the world and its inhabitants, and the created order itself, goes through changes.

It’s the “therefore we will not fear” that is a challenge for us sometimes, isn’t it? And hopefully the assurances in this Psalm will help us with that, if fear is something that challenges you these days.

The Psalmist is realistic about what goes on in the world, and addresses it head on. Because the background images of psalm 46 are turbulent. Praying this psalm puts us in touch with the reality that the world can sometimes be a turbulent place. Three sets of images are used:

1. There is turbulence in *creation*: earthquakes, volcanoes, flood waters.

We still have those, plus the reality of our climate changing. As one climate

scientist put it, the hot places are getting hotter and drier, and the wet places are getting wetter. This isn't just global warming; it's global weirding.

2. The next set of images refers to political turbulence: angry nations, kingdoms that rise and fall, changes in governments that cause rancor and violence. We witness that on a weekly basis in our time.

3. The third set of images refers to warfare-type turbulence: bows, spears, chariots.

So, here we are again—there isn't anything happening today that wasn't happening when the psalmist composed this prayer about 3,000 years ago.

And in the midst of turbulence and upheaval and change, the psalmist *prays* in response. Not just in Psalm 46, by the way, but all over the Psalms. But this particular prayer is one of the best examples of a person praying, not to *escape* from upheaval, change and turbulence, or to rage against it, but to *find God in the midst of it*. There is not a hint of escapism in the prayers of the people in the Bible, or any of God's people throughout history. What we find, rather, are prayers that recognize that God is always present, that God helps people in the midst of trouble and change, and that God works for good. Psalm 46 is a shining example.

Because even though the imagery of Psalm 46 is turbulent, turbulence is not the subject of the prayer. God is. “*God* is our refuge and strength. *God* is a very present help in times of trouble, though the world should change. *God* is in the midst of the peoples. *God* makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. *God* breaks the bow and shatters the spear” and so on.

This is so wonderful, and so important to us because we tend to put our trouble, or the world’s trouble as the subject of our thoughts and prayers. When that happens, God may or may not be invited into the prayer; it’s more like we just want God to eavesdrop on our worrisome conversations with ourselves. But it’s amazing how many times in Scripture, when it tells us to pray, it tells us to make God the subject. For example, from Phil.4: “Be anxious for nothing, pray about everything; let your requests be made known *to God*, and the peace *of God* which passes understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” And from Psalm 37: “Don’t fret over evil... delight yourself in the Lord”. The great reminder here is: make God the subject of our prayers.

The psalmist says, “Come and behold the *works of the Lord*... See what *God* does.” The psalmist doesn’t say, “Oh my gosh, look at the upheaval in the world!” He *acknowledges* it, without escape or fretting, yet turns his attention God-ward,

and becomes absorbed in who God is and what God does. And this seems to give the writer a sense of calm and confidence. It steadies the heart and mind.

The Psalmist proclaims the promise and assurance that the *Lord of Hosts* is with us; the *God of Jacob* is our stronghold. This is the great heartbeat of the prayer, repeated through the psalm. *The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.*

Btw, “Lord of hosts” is a military term describing a vast army, and sometimes referring to vast angel armies. So “Lord of hosts” means “God of power and might.” This God is *with us*.

“God of Jacob” recalls a family story, from Genesis. It refers to the God of the man who wrestled with God for a blessing; it’s a personal story of God’s involvement with Jacob and his extended family. So “God of Jacob” means “the personal God.” This God—the same God—is our refuge/stronghold.

And there is a surprising reversal in how these images are used: we expect the military metaphor to be associated with defense, and “stronghold.” And we expect the personal metaphor to be associated with nearness and intimacy, of being “with us.” But the images are rearranged so that we get intimacy with the mighty God, the commander in chief of angel armies, and we get defense from the family friend:

“The Lord of hosts *is with us*; the God of Jacob *is our stronghold*.” The powerful God *befriends* us; the personal God *protects and defends* us.

Why does the psalmist do this? The psalmist does this so we don't box God in as we pray. It prevents cliché in our prayers, and stereotypes in our expectations of who God is and what God will do. God is not just the warrior God who smites enemies and provides strongholds for us to escape to; and God is not simply the personal God who brings comfort. God is the tender-hearted warrior who knows how to become close and present with us, and God is the family friend who knows how to defend us. The psalmist is messing with our minds (that's a good thing!)

In any case, God is one and the metaphors apply to the same God. And God cannot be boxed in or stereotyped. And we are invited to let go of clichés in prayer, and let God be God, and let God surprise us with how he wants to be seen and known. “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

And if this is the heartbeat of the prayer, this heart is meant to beat calmly, slowly. Because the grand conclusion to the prayer, which is really the grand invitation to respond to the God who is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, change, & upheaval is: “Be still and know that I am God.” Be still and know that I am God. That's the invitation, in response.

Not, 'Now get busy and try to fix everything.' There is indeed a time and place for action—and act we must, at the right time. But here, and throughout Scripture, the invitation to respond to the world and to the God who loves us is, first and foremost, to quiet ourselves, and know God and be known by God (that's a nice paraphrase of "Be still..."—know God, and be known by God). I hear the psalmist saying, "Quiet yourself down, and gain perspective by focusing your energy and attention on the God of history, the God who loves you and loves the world, the God who knows what's going on and knows how and when to act."

Human reactions and responses to life and to the world's events often show that we don't always react and respond very well. We sometimes meet violence with violence of some kind, or we sometimes over-function and anxiously try to fix things ourselves (take matters into our own hands); or sometimes we try to escape or run away. Or maybe we are tempted to fall into a heap of despair.

God's solution and invitation in response to change and upheaval is: Be still and know that I am God. Stay present to the God who is present to you—the God of history who has handled a few changes and upheavals before! This response and invitation has been, and continues to be, consistently issued by God to everyone. Here is a great example:

In the 6th century B.C., the nation of Israel was attacked by the Babylonian empire, and the city of Jerusalem was ransacked and burned to the ground. You can read about it in the Old Testament prophets, and the book of Lamentations. This was Jerusalem's 911, except worse, because this wasn't just a terrorist attack: the Babylonians conquered them, and deported tens of thousands of Israelites and took them into captivity in Babylon.

And in the midst of this time, Isaiah the prophet speaks and says to the people (Isaiah 30:15): *"For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: in returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength."* By "returning" it means: returning to God, returning to faith and trust and prayer. Again: *In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength.* Just sit with that for a moment and let it sink in... Your country has just been attacked and conquered, your capital city reduced to rubble, friends and family have been taken into captivity, and the God you worship and serve says to you, *"In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength."* Really?!?!? That's the proper response??? Can you imagine, after *our* 911, president Bush, or one of our leaders, or even a pastor, getting up and saying, "My fellow Americans: In returning and rest you shall be saved..."? Again, if there are no clichés in prayer,

there are no pat answers or responses to life's challenges. Sometimes God asks us to do the counter-intuitive, paradoxical thing.

God's invitation to us in the midst upheaval, and change and all that, is to be still. To quiet ourselves. To trust. Be still and be quiet long enough so we can look to God, and God's strength, and let God lead. And once we are able to do that, and do it consistently, we are less likely to be overwhelmed by everything, and we can then **act** from a place of peace and calm. And I would add, love. "Let all things be done in love" is the apostle Paul's great line (1Cor.16:14).

Psalm 46 is a prayer that acknowledges who *God* is and what *God* does; and it reflects a response of trust, of waiting, of quiet confidence, knowing God and being known by God. The God who is not threatened by or worried about anything, the God who makes things right, the God who is with us.

Prayer exercise to try this week: repeat a line from the Psalm; let it be a breath prayer. For example, "Be still and know that I am God." Or just "be still." Or "God is my refuge and strength; very present to me; therefore I need not fear." Repeat it slowly, let it sink in. Then sit silently and listen...

Be Still My Soul