

“Fearless Factor”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Psalm 46

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

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.

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

God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.

“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.” The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

As we see the aftermath of Hurricane Florence or any storm for that matter, we have a sense of what the Psalmist is speaking about in our scripture reading for today. In the midst of the mountains shaking through the roar of the sea, one does not doubt that there is fear in the hearts of the people. Their lives have been turned upside down and they have lost everything. Many folks have lost loved ones. Even once the hurricane has stilled, the flooding and power outages continue to wreak havoc on people's lives.

It is no wonder that the Psalmist uses imagery of nature when talking about fear. Everyone knows the power that storms have. When mountains shake in the heart of the sea, it is no doubt this is poetry that speaks of earthquakes, hurricanes or even tornados. Now, I have never experienced firsthand any one of these, thanks be to God. But, I have seen pictures and film clips. When I was a child living in Oklahoma which was in the middle of “Tornado Alley”, they would show movies of tornados during school. It was to make us aware how important it was to seek safety but it also put a HUGE FEAR in me. I was forever fearful of storms as a child.

And yet, the writer of Psalm 46 comes back with another image of a river and a stream. We hear, *“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved.”* In the visual of a calm, babbling stream that only gives life through water for habitation and creatures, we see the presents of God. And then if this visual wasn't enough, it goes onto to say, *“God makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.”* Through the chaos and the violence, God is there giving us peace!

Our storms don't always come in the form of natural disasters. We only have to turn on the news at 5 or 11pm to hear that chaos and turmoil is raging all around us. Our mountains that shake us and the sea that envelopes us are divorce, cancer, grief from the death of a loved one, financial debt, raising a challenging child, being caught as a undocumented person, losing a job or losing anything. The list goes on and on. Fear is what we don't know and most of that comes from not having control over what is happening in our lives. It can eat us up and shake us to our inner core. Where do we find that peaceful stream? Where do we find the strength to go on? Where do we find God?

Several years ago, I attended Synod School. Our theme for this week was “Fearless Factor”. Throughout this week, we explored God being our “fearless factor” in the equation of life. Because let's face it, we will all face fear in the storms of life. How will we handle the storms? What will be our response as we find ourselves as part of the equation?

It was during that week of Synod School that I was able to go visit Rev. Bill Huber. Bill was my long time pastor at St. Andrew. He was the one that taught my confirmation class, married my husband and I and baptized my daughter, Bethany. He was very special to me so it was a treat to go and visit him and his wife, Jane at their retirement home on the Ohio River near Hanover where Synod School was being held. It was a joy to reminisce about our times at St. Andrew and him sharing stories of how he grew up and attended Hanover College. It was only when he started talking about his current volunteer work at a veteran's home did his memory fail him. He got in the middle of the story and this glazed look came over him stopping all the thought processes. Tears came to his eyes and he became quite upset. He shared that the senior moments had been quite frequent. I could tell that this was a storm which he was facing head on. It was fear that his memory and independence would leave all together. Before I left, I made sure that Bill realized the impact of his faith had on me and the growth of my faith. I also told him that being present for those Veterans was a huge gift and that he had many lives still to touch. I believe that God connected me to Bill throughout my life. I believe that God was instrumental in connecting Bill to the Veterans as well as many others throughout his time as a pastor. God gives us strength and courage through our connection to others to face the storms in our lives. But, we have to be vulnerable to make those connections and be a part of the equation.

In verse 10 in the Psalm, we actually hear God speak to us, "Be still, and know that I am God!" In the Message version it says, "Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, Your High God, above politics, above everything." This is not just some quiet, meditative call from God. No! It is as one commentator puts it, "It is a stillness of snapping to attention, of hyper attentiveness, of dropping whatever is in your hands or distracting you, and attending carefully to God's word." (Feasting on the Word- Year C, Volume 4; by Susan K. Olson; Westminster John Knox Press; 2010; p. 325)

There are times that fear can consume us. We can get so bogged down with what is going on that we fail to open ourselves up to God. We fail to hear God in the midst of the storm. This past Friday and Saturday at the all church retreat, the group pondered and explored the question, "How do we hear God in our lives?"

The children and adults at Pyoca talked about numerous ways that we hear God.

In nature, it is amazing to stand out in nature and just be still. You hear the birds singing. You feel the wind blowing on your face. Your skin soaks up the warmth of the sun. You open your eyes and look at God's creation. There are many times that I am walking outside and God speaks to me in the silence. At Pyoca, the children, Goehrig, Pam and I went on a scavenger hunt looking for all kinds of wonderful things. We took all of our treasures and glued them to a board making this collage. We also got to see this amazing orange fungi growing on a decaying stump. You never know what extraordinary things God will show you in nature.



In prayer, we hear God through our conversations with our creator and also when others pray for us. We can pray for our wants and our needs. We can pray for our fears and our joys. We can thank God and be grateful for all of our blessings. We can ask for forgiveness and seek grace. But, there is something special about being in silent and just listening. Recently, I have had something heavy on my heart and this has kept me up at night with worry. The senseless things about this is it is something that is totally out of my control. Finally, my spiritual director told me that I am just going to have to let go of this. I am going to have to give it to God and be patient. Finally, that is what I did. I quit asking over and over again for this and I gave it to God. And, in that silence and in the waiting, I have found peace.

In worship, we hear God. When I lead Children in Worship, I like to sing, “Be Still and Know that God is God, Be Still and Know that God is God, Be Still and Know that God is God” before I tell the Bible story for that day. It is a time for the children to know it is time to snap to attention and listen to what God is saying through me. It is a reminder that this is God’s time and that we should be open to hearing God’s word.

We come to this place to worship in our sanctuary. We leave the outside storms and chaos of our lives and come into these walls for rest and peace. It is our time to be with God. God may speak through the singing of a hymn, the anthem of the choir or praise band, the scripture reading, the sermon or prayer. But, this is a very special time. It is like we have come to rest on holy ground and God is with us.

In reading of the scripture, we hear God. The scripture I am reminded of was during one of the worship services at Synod School. It was the story of when Mary is visited by the angel, Gabriel. This messenger tells Mary that she is going to have a baby. Mary hears “fear not” because you are going to do this great thing for God. She has been chosen to have God’s Son. No matter how hard this was going to be, God would be with her. All would be okay.

And that night just as the Holy Spirit often does, we got to see God’s presence. It was little Grace who decided to sing “Away in a Manger” for the talent show. She was wearing her cardboard wings covered in aluminum foil and a string of tinsel as her halo. She got about halfway through the song with no problem but then her nerves got the best of her and she stopped! It was only a few seconds and the congregation picked up where Grace left off. It didn’t take long and Grace finished with the congregation.

How does God become the “Fearless Factor” in our lives? I think we find and hear God in many ways. God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble. Thanks be to the Psalmist

who reminds us that God is always there with outstretched arms welcoming us in from the storm.
Amen.

Benediction – Amy Grant’s song “Arms of Love”

Lord, I'm really glad you're here.
I hope you feel the same when you see all my fear,
and how I fail.
I fall sometimes.
It's hard to walk in sinking sand.
I miss the rock, and find I've nowhere else to stand.
I start to cry.
Lord, please help me.
Raise my hands, so you can lift me up.
Hold me close, hold me tighter.

I have found a place where I can hide;
it's safe inside
your arms of love.
Like a child who's held throughout a storm;
I'm safe and warm
in your arms of love.

Storms may come and storms may go.
I wonder just how many storms it takes
until I finally know
you're here always.
Even when my skies are far from grey.
Let me stay, Lord, teach me to stay.

In the place I've found where I can hide;
it's safe inside
your arms of love.
Like a child who's held throughout a storm;
I'm safe and warm
in your arms of love.