

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

Psalm 46

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What do you do, where do you turn when the world is falling apart? What do you do, where do you turn when it feels like *your* world is falling apart? Where do you turn when there's trouble, when circumstances "threaten to undo us"?

Facing difficulty and danger, Martin Luther used to say to one of his associates, "Come, Philipp, let us sing the 46th Psalm" (Robert J. Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul*, Vol 1, 15).

Psalm 46 opens with the powerful and memorable line, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." Luther paraphrased it this way in his famous hymn:

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
(*The United Methodist Hymnal* #110)

Luther wrote that hymn in 1529 and it became the anthem and rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation. It was a source of strength and inspiration for people standing for and even dying for their convictions.

Luther valued music. He saw it as a gift and grace of God that drives out the devil and makes people cheerful. He said, "Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits" (Morgan). As part of his effort to reform the church, Luther wanted to restore worship. He worked with skilled musicians to create new music for Christians. He wanted them to sing in their everyday language. He promoted congregational singing and wrote many hymns including the famous "A Mighty Fortress." He'd sometimes borrow secular melodies for his hymns because people were familiar with them.

“A Mighty Fortress” is his most famous hymn. It’s been translated into nearly every known language and there are 60-80 English versions of it. One British version gives the opening lines this way:

A safe stronghold our God is still, a trusty shield and weapon;
He’ll help us clear from all the ill that hath us now o’ertaken.
(Morgan; Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*)

The version we’re used to singing has the word “bulwark” in it. I looked that up. It means a wall or rampart built for defense, or any protection against external danger (*Random House Dictionary, Classic Ed.*). So God is a defense who never fails.

Going back to the psalm, we see that God is our refuge, strength, and help. *Refuge* is one of the key words in the book of Psalms. To “take refuge in God” means to trust God. This psalm starts with the affirmation that God is a reliable refuge. God is worthy of trust (J. Clinton McCann, *The Book of Psalms, The New Interpreter’s Bible*). We find true security only in the Lord God.

Refuge describes the outer aspect of salvation. God defends us from evil. We take shelter in God. *Strength* implies the dynamic aspect of salvation. God is within us and empowers us for action. The last phrase summarizes both aspects: God is an ever-present help in trouble. Or, a very present help. God is ready to be found (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary*). He makes himself available to us. We turn to God, we take shelter in God, we draw strength from God, we receive help from God. Then, when trouble comes, we’re already in relationship with the Lord. Don’t wait for times of trouble to seek the Lord’s strength and help. Live in God, continually draw on God’s strength and help. Then when trouble comes, we can meet it with confidence.

We don’t have to be afraid, even if the world is falling apart. Verses 2-3 describe a huge catastrophe. It’d be like a massive earthquake and a tsunami with a giant hurricane thrown in. For the ancient Jews, this would be a picture of the world coming undone, almost a reversal of creation. The

roaring seas were a place of chaos. The mountains held up the earth and sky. If they fell, everything else would too.

In our day, natural disasters continue to be threats. In the human realm, terrorism, war and other violence threaten. Dramatic changes in our culture shake us. Broken relationships can make it feel like the world is coming apart. Sickness, loss, and death may threaten to undo us.

But because we trust God, because God is our refuge and strength and help, we will not fear. We're part of God's unshakable kingdom (Hebrews 12:28). If we believe that God reigns, we don't have to be afraid because no matter what happens, God will have the last word; God will put things right; God will sustain us through it all.

There's a Hebrew word that you see a lot in the Psalms, though some modern translations just put it in a footnote. It's the word *selah*. Nobody knows for sure what it meant. It was probably a musical term, an interlude or a rest, maybe just to mark the end of a section. So we don't normally read it. That'd be like reading a piece of music, coming to a certain mark and saying, "Rest." Or, "Pause." Or, "Hold." That's not how you read music.

A new section begins in verse 4 and continues through verse 6. We move from the roaring of nature to the roaring of nations. The trouble that was portrayed in cosmic terms in the first section is described in human terms in verses 4-6. "The nations are in an uproar" just like the waters of the sea roar. The kingdoms totter just like the mountains shake. In the midst of all this turmoil there is a stable place (McCann). It's the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. That refers to Jerusalem and the temple. God is there, in the midst of the city, keeping it from falling. God, the ever-present help, will help his city.

Notice this beautiful statement in verse 4: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." Instead of the surging, roaring waters of chaos, there's a river that brings gladness and joy to God's people.

There's not a river that runs through Jerusalem. This is a picture of a spiritual reality. God is the steady center. God rules. And God is the source of this river that gives life and joy. The prophet Ezekiel has a vision of a spiritual temple. From within it, from God's throne there flows a stream that becomes a mighty river that gives life wherever it goes. Fruit trees grow on

its banks. They never wither, their fruit never fails, and they bring healing (47:1-12).

The prophet Zechariah has a vision of the Lord standing on the Mount of Olives just east of Jerusalem. The mountain splits in two and living water flows from Jerusalem (14:1-8).

At the Feast of Tabernacles, during a ceremony when water was being poured out at the temple, Jesus announced, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." He was talking about the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39). Jesus fulfills what the temple was about. He is God dwelling with us. He is the meeting place of God and people. Jesus is the stable center for the people of God. He's the source of living water, the river that gives life and joy. He gives the Holy Spirit who flows in and through our lives, making glad the people of God.

There's one more picture of this river in the book of Revelation.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (22:1-2)

The promises in the psalms and the prophets about the city of God are fulfilled in Jesus and in us who know him.

Let's get back to the psalm. There's a refrain or chorus that's repeated (verses 7, 11). It sums up and reaffirms what the rest of the psalm says. "The LORD Almighty is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress."

In Luther's hymn, he leaves the Hebrew word for Almighty untranslated: *sabaoth*. "Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same." "Lord Sabaoth" means the LORD Almighty or the LORD of hosts or armies. God commanded the armies of Israel. God commands the armies of heaven. God is a warrior. But God fights by bringing peace. He makes wars

cease and he destroys the weapons of war. That's the kind of "desolation" God brings on the earth.

God says to the nations, "Be still, and know that I am God." That's not a call to tranquil meditation. It's a call to lay down arms. It's more like, "Stop it!" or "Throw down your weapons." It means, "Depend on God instead of yourselves."

Jesus said something similar once out on the Sea of Galilee with his disciples. A furious storm blew in. Waves were breaking over the boat and threatening to swamp it. Jesus was asleep in the stern. When the disciples woke him, he rebuked the wind and spoke to the waves. He said, "Peace! Be still!" In a sermon I heard on this text the preacher said there are two Greek words for peace. One is *irene*. It's the gentle word we'd usually think of when we hear peace. That's not the word Jesus uses here. He uses the word *siopa*. It means, "Hush!" "Get quiet!" Jesus talks to the chaotic waters and quiets them, tames them. His words, "Be still" could mean, "Be muzzled!" (Mark 4:35-41). Jesus is the Lord of hosts with us, coming into the chaos of our lives, quieting the storms that threaten us.

God is not only the LORD of hosts, the mighty Lord. He's also the God of Jacob. That means he's the God of grace who chose Jacob/Israel. As the God of Jacob, he's been with his people all through their history. He continues to be with his people, with us.

The last section of the psalm is not yet fulfilled. At some future time, God will finally make all wars cease and destroy all weapons of war. When humanity lays down our weapons and knows that the Lord is God, God will be exalted among the nations, God will be exalted in the earth.

But even now the LORD Almighty is with us and the God of Jacob is our fortress, our refuge, our high stronghold. We can trust him. We can depend on him instead of ourselves. And we can begin now to anticipate, to live into the future reality when God's kingdom comes in all its fullness and God's glory is revealed in the whole earth. We live now in light of that future. The power of God's future comes to us now in the Holy Spirit.

I read about The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. It's a Roman Catholic cathedral in Los Angeles. It's a haven in the middle of the noisy city. The building is remarkable and it's long been a meaningful place for

many people. Before entering the worship space, you have to walk through large doors and travel down a long hallway. In the sanctuary, most people immediately notice the large, handmade tapestries that hang on the walls. They represent the communion of the saints, everyone who has confessed Jesus Christ as Lord.

At the front of the worship space, behind the Lord's Table, is a large tapestry with the image of a Los Angeles city map. That tapestry includes words from Revelation 21:3: "God's dwelling is among mortals. God will dwell with them. They will be God's people. And God will be with them." The combination of those words with the map of Los Angeles is striking.

Los Angeles is a city that, like any other city, has had and continues to have its share of violence, turmoil, and chaos. Yet, in the midst of that violence and chaos sits a cathedral with the Lord's Table and a map proclaiming the dwelling place of God is not something far away but a reality on earth. Christians stop at this place daily to remind themselves that in a world where violence is inescapable, God is God and God's promises are being fulfilled. And, as Psalm 46 reminds us, "in this city, it is not for us to fix things. It is for us to expect God to fix things." The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge (John Goldingay, *Psalms*, Vol 2; quoted at

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1828, accessed 7/26/17). The Lord is not only our refuge, he's also our strength and help. He energizes us and sustains us in doing what we need to do as part of his kingdom, as channels for his living water to flow through.

Picture a map of Durant or Caddo, of Bryan County. Do you believe that God lives among us, that God is with us here?

As we join Martin Luther and millions of others in singing the 46th Psalm, let's renew our trust in the Lord who is with us, who gives us a steady center for our lives, who gives living water that makes us glad, who fights by bringing peace.