

Psalm 46
June 1, 2008

South Plains
9th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Power That Works

On Memorial Day, we hiked with friends up Humpback Rocks where we could see Waynesboro to the west and Afton to the east. Scrambling up those rocks is exhilarating, both because of the view and the very reasonable fear of falling to the east or to the west. What are you afraid of? Everybody is afraid of something: snakes, heights, deep water, darkness... poverty... success? Fear is different for each one of us. I understand that when Americans traveled west to settle the Great Plains, some of those covered wagons refused to stop at the prairie. They kept going to the Rocky Mountains because the wide, open spaces of the plains were frightening to Easterners accustomed to hills and forests. Everybody is afraid of something.

Psalm 46 draws a line in the sand and dares fear to come any closer:

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

Therefore we will not fear. PERIOD.

It is true, says the psalmist, that the earth changes, the oceans roar and foam, mountains tremble. Verse two says, "The mountains shake in the heart of the sea," a line that evokes the birth of a tsunami. But, God is our refuge. Therefore we will not fear.

It is also true, according to this poet that "the nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter." It's hard for most of us to imagine the kind of political turmoil that afflicts so many of the nations in the developing world today: In Tibet, Kenya, Palestine and a dozen other places, peace is an unknown quantity. What the people of those countries know all too well is the kind of unrest experienced by ancient Israel as she was tossed back and forth between the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Syrians, the Greeks and finally the Romans. The Memorial Day weekend afforded us opportunity to remember the crisis of our own Civil War, and two World Wars; and the sacrifice of many lives.

The original language of this psalm uses the same words to describe oceans and nations that roar, and mountains and kingdoms that totter. Whether the disaster is from natural causes or manmade causes,

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear.

It's hard for us to devote too much worry time to cyclones, tsunamis or earthquakes. We take precautions and move on with our lives. In this season of the year, we rightly worry more about automobile accidents, especially when young drivers are enjoying the new freedoms of summer. We do worry about the high cost of fuel, about the car-jack thief in the parking lot, and about the white collar thief stealing our identity. There is no

end to the list of legitimate fears eating away at our security.

Some of us live in foolish denial, saying it's only "other people" who are in danger. Some of us joke about the danger in order to bolster our courage. Some of us seek to escape fear and anxiety through sensual pleasures or chemicals that "adjust" our attitude. But, some of us – and this is what Psalm 46 models – some of us learn to look at the insecurities of life, admit the danger is real, and then look for the splendor of the Lord of hosts even in the terror. The commitment of faith in Jesus Christ is a commitment to look for the work of God even in the worst circumstances.

If we spend much time watching the entertainment that passes for news or the news that mines the entertainment world almost exclusively, we can fill our minds with images and stories that inevitably make us afraid. I have a friend who teaches new members in her Catholic Church. She likes to repeat the observation that Christians do not see different things, but Christians do see things differently through the eyes of faith.

One of the ways we can see events differently is by reminding ourselves again and again that

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

Therefore we will not fear.

This is an attitude we have to practice until it becomes instinct, until it becomes an engrained habit that comes to

the fore under stress. I occasionally enjoy reading war stories of pilots. The plot is often the same. A plane is shot up. The pilot is wounded to the point of losing consciousness. Yet, somehow, he manages to bring the aircraft home and make a safe landing because years of practice have engrained in him the attitude and the reflexes to bring the plane home safely. Christians practice in worship. Sunday by Sunday we acknowledge God's rule over our lives and our world. We hear the word of God until this attitude settles into our gray matter and becomes part of the wrinkles in our brain. Worship teaches that "God is our refuge."

A second way of seeing things differently is by having a different vision of the world God intends. We don't see the world through rose-colored glasses, but we do develop a sanctified imagination. In the imagination of the psalmist, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." Readers have speculated for centuries about what those words mean. In the agricultural economy of the Old Testament, a dependable water supply made the difference between famine and plenty. We are re-learning that lesson around the world, even in the Rivanna River watershed. Some read these lines and think of a heavenly river described in the book of Revelation. Some recall that Jerusalem had a spring that gave water to the city of God when it was under siege. Others remember the river flowing out of Eden in Genesis 2. They're all correct. The point is that this psalm kindles our imagination to see that God's desire for creation is a life-giving stream that makes us glad.

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

A third way we see things differently from the rest of the world is by looking for justice and grace where the world sees only punishment and luck. It takes practice because much of our vocabulary is slightly embarrassed to refer to God's presence. In the final stanza the psalmist invites the nations of the world to

Come, behold the works of the Lord.

But the "works of the Lord" in this verse are the "desolations he has brought on the earth." In other words, God is correcting his creatures when we go astray even if that correction hurts. We want to be careful about this language and apply the judgment first and most often to ourselves. It's cheap and easy to tell someone else they are suffering the punishment of God. It takes a special gift to believe God may be correcting us when we are suffering. To see grace in the midst of pain.., that is a special blessing indeed.

Last week I toured the regional jail with the chaplain, Alonzo Minor. He became a chaplain after serving time himself. He told us that going to prison was the best thing that could have happened to him at the time.

Seeing the world through the eyes of faith does not come easy. Clearly, it takes an attitude cultivated in

worship, an imagination inspired by the word of God, and the courage to look for justice and grace. I think the psalmist knew very well how difficult it would be to look at a fallen world and see the security only God could provide. If students of the Psalter are correct, this is a psalm to be sung after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, after the walls of the holy city had been decimated by invading armies, after the exiles had returned to find their homes in ruins. They are the ones who sang,

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

In the midst of desolation, when despair would have been easy, the psalmist quietly sings,
Be still and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.

If you and I want to see with the eyes of faith, we have to take the time to look. Above all, we have to learn to be still and know who God is. Fear and anxiety may distract us, but the final word from these psalms is not a call to arms, but a simple word of grace, a reminder that God is in control, a word of surrender into God's keeping.

Be still!
Be still and know....
Be still and know that I am God.