

Psalm 46  
October 30, 2011

South Plains

### I Am a Refugee

This is Reformation Sunday, commemorating the day 494 years ago when Martin Luther nailed to a church door in Germany a challenge to the way the church behaved and believed. Luther's challenge met with such resistance that a few years later he was compelled to write a hymn of comfort, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." By that time, people had begun to flock to the Protestant cause, despite the danger involved. Luther's hymn is a paraphrase of Psalm 46, reminding us of God's protection promised in scripture.

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble. (46:1)

I turn to this hymn and its psalm as a foundation for stewardship season. Our stewardship season this year comes at a time when many people are in trouble; and I suspect all of us experience at least some anxiety about what the future holds. Financial decisions are especially fraught. The psalmist makes a strong affirmation of faith in the God who saves, shelters, and who supplies the resources to overcome every difficulty.

When Luther reads in verse 2, "we will not fear though the earth should change," this was not merely a

figure of speech. The world was already changing with Columbus' voyage to America and Gutenberg's printing press. Luther's challenge to the church added to those changes by kicking off a revolution no less amazing and no less violent than the Arab spring revolts in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. The psalm begins and ends by saying that God is our refuge. St. Augustine, who knew something about revolutions himself, points out that tyrants and strongmen offer protection, but their protection will fail because they are most concerned to protect themselves. One of the dangers in our world today is that economic and political turmoil will tempt some nations to turn to a dictator, someone who provides order and easy answers at the expense of freedom. Already some Afghans are nostalgic for the security of the Taliban, and some Iraqis remember selectively Saddam Hussein's dependable police. Even Americans are tempted by easy answers.

Only one refuge is both secure and safe when "the nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter (46:6)." The Lord speaks, "he utters his voice" in the words of the psalm, and all the tumult ceases. The peace of God reigns. How can this happen? The key is the power of the word of God to bring peace and righteousness.

In the background of Psalm 46 is the first chapter of Genesis. Out of the darkness of nothing, out of the empty chaos, the Creator speaks to make light, earth, sky and stars, green growing things, animals on earth, in the air and under the sea; and finally God said, "Let us

make humankind (Genesis 1:26).” It was all accomplished by the word of the Lord. By God’s command we have been created and given stewardship of creation. That includes the management of money and property and natural resources. We may fail in our stewardship of these gifts, but we should never suppose that the owner is anyone but God. God is ultimately in control. The earth is the Lord’s... everything, even the instruments we devise to take charge of the world belong finally to the Maker of heaven and earth. That’s a great comfort when we make mistakes, when we grow greedy for material things or when we fall victim to someone else’s greed. We are the Lord’s.

Sometimes I miss Martin Luther’s vivid imagination. He characterized the world as “this world with devils filled.” He believed in “the prince of darkness grim,” to quote again from his hymn. Perhaps we would not be so surprised at the brutality of human beings if we could accept that the worst evil in this world is beyond reason, beyond explanation. In the hymn, the answer to evil is “one little word.” It is the word of God. Not just the words of the Bible, although Luther certainly trusted in the power of scripture to guide us. The word he holds to is the living word, Jesus Christ. “Our striving would be losing without the right man on our side,” he sings. Luther conceives of a battle where the forces of chaos and evil would overwhelm us except for the presence of Jesus Christ, “him who with us sideth.”

You remember that in Matthew 28, Jesus promises his followers, “I am with you always.” The psalm foreshadows that promise as the psalmist sings twice, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” This is our heritage, the confidence of the people of God that has proven true over millennia, the trust that God is with us, saving us from trouble, sheltering us from anything more than we can endure, and supplying our needs. “Be still,” says the psalm, “and know that I am God.”

We received our copy of the AARP magazine last week. As usual, there’s an article about financial planning for the future. I was impressed with its wisdom. The author points out that good financial planning requires three pieces of information. First, that we know how long we’re going to live; and second, that we know how much money we’re going to save for retirement. But, she goes on to state the obvious. We simply cannot know either how many years we will be here or how much money our investments will be worth. Too many variables are involved. But, there’s a third essential factor in financial planning, a factor we can work with. We can know how much money we choose to spend. More importantly, we can adjust the amount we spend. That third variable is where the provision of our heavenly Father meets our freedom to plan and act. When we trust God for the future, we remain free to adapt to changing circumstances; and to adapt with contented joy. True freedom starts by trusting God. That faith makes stewardship into joyful partnership with our Maker.

Mary was a second grade school teacher for her entire career, a career that started long before the days of generous state retirement plans. She lived in a little brick house that she and her brother inherited from their father. The brother died. The house needed repairs, but it was adequate. By the time I knew Mary, she was confined mostly to home, looked after by her cat, her church, and her former students. We all thought she would live to celebrate her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Everyone enjoyed visiting her because of her serenity and peace. Disagreements with her many opinions (and she was opinionated) never produced bitterness because she simply stated what she thought and let the rest of us think what we would. She was content with what she had. When she died, everyone was surprised at the amount of money she left to the church. But, no one who knew Mary doubted that it came from a lifetime of trusting Jesus Christ day after day. That's who she was. Long ago, she had taken refuge in a mighty God.

Many of us will have a personal story about our own experience of God's presence in our lives. The stories vary immensely from transforming moments with the Holy Spirit to years of questions about the reality of God. This particular psalm moves from speaking about God as a personal refuge from the trouble of the world to exalting God as the ruler who makes wars cease, the absolute arbiter of all troubles.

In verse 8, the psalmist issues a bold invitation to those kingdoms tottering in the uproar of the world:

“Come, behold the works of the Lord.... He makes wars cease.” Not many nations, including our own United States, will entrust their future exclusively to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, we can know that the ultimate source of security is neither our weapons nor our gross national product, but the Ruler of heaven and earth. God is our refuge and help, and our destiny.

I'm a refugee, a refugee seeking some haven from the vicissitudes of the stock market, the threat of cancer and memory loss, the terror of local and international lawlessness. The church is such a haven although it has its limitations. Psalm 46 points to the city of God, Jerusalem, the capital city of King David. Jerusalem is the most famous of all the places in scripture where God dwells. We speak of God as omnipresent. God is everywhere, we say; and that is true. It is also true that God chooses special places where people experience the holy presence in ways that minister to particular needs. Many of us find that God is present in this sanctuary in ways especially important to us. And, so we can say that this is a refuge, a very present help in trouble, a mighty fortress. Of course, God is not limited to these four walls. God is also present in Kirk Hall and in other churches. For most of us, however, we need to find those special places of refuge that meet our needs.

Our vision for South Plains Presbyterian Church is to be both a place and an opportunity for refuge. The place is visible in this lovely sanctuary, hallowed by years of care on the part of people known to most of us only by

name. It's visible in the newness of Kirk Hall, hallowed by the gifts that make it possible to pay down the mortgage. It's visible for many of us in the sturdy oaks, the colorful maples and the mountains enhancing the churchyard with evidence of the Creator. This is a place we can rightly call a "holy habitation of the Most High."

We also have a vision of the church that occupies this place, the church that is the people not the buildings, a vision of a church that offers an opportunity for others to experience the God of love. About 10 million people in the world are official refugees. But, many times that number fit the description of refugees as people wandering in search of security. In fact, refugee status applies to most people at one time or another in our lives. Holding on to security is like holding on to the greased pig at the state fair. It's constantly just about to escape. It is our privilege as the people of God to open a window of opportunity for others to find security in the God who is a refuge and strength. It's a privilege we've inherited from Martin Luther and from a long line of Christians stretching through the Middle Ages all the way to Paul and Peter back to Jesus himself.

We are stewards of this place, but more importantly of a mission entrusted to us by the one who is our security. The psalm advises, "Be still and know that I am God!" Secure in Christ, we can be still. We can know the stillness, the peace and the freedom of stewardship.