

Psalm 46 “On Our Side, By Our Side, God’s Peace Inside” August 13, 2017  
The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

**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.**

It has been difficult this week to focus on the singular message of our scripture text chosen for today in this summer sermon series, “For the Bible Tells Me So.”

The world has intervened, in the form of deeply disturbing, threatening language about unnecessary, preemptive nuclear war, and, yesterday’s equally disturbing, violent and very uncivil happenings in Charlottesville, VA. Prayers for the victims of white racists and anti-Semitism are appropriate. These domestic terrorists are founded in a lie. God is love, not hate. We pray for changed hearts for those who spew hate and bigotry. We pray for those who continue to proclaim the lasting power of love over hate and who practice justice and mercy in the face of generations of racism.

I’ve spent more time than usual over the past 24 hours with our scripture text in one hand and the latest news in the other, praying, writing and re-writing; hopeful that what I have to share might be meaningful, helpful and true.

The way I see it today is that Psalm 46 provides ballast for our ship of faith, individually and collectively. It steadies with reassurance. It roots us deeply in God's love- intended for people who turn to God for hope. It transports us, to a way and a place to be receptive to the mercy of God, available to all, equally.

The Psalmists, King David and others, opened their hearts to God in difficult times. The result came in free verse, inspired by God, instructed by the Spirit. Their words are wisdom born from experience, from more difficulty than we can begin to imagine, battle-worn, tried and tested.

Beyond what the Psalms impart with words, they describe a world formed and inhabited by a gracious and loving God. They transport us to a world of God, within the words of God.

Today's Psalm might be familiar to us in more than just one way. But any way we hear it- it keeps us grounded in God- it redirects us out of any self-centeredness toward an Other, placing us in God's hands, as God's children together. These words might ring familiar: 'a refuge and strength', 'a river whose streams make glad'; 'be still and know that I am God'.

Or perhaps our opening hymn is the way you know the Psalm the best; Luther's famous 'free' translation: "A mighty fortress- a bulwark never failing- a shelter, he, amid the flood, of mortal ills prevailing..." This Psalm has been part of our spiritual diet as Protestants for the past 500 years.... It's in our spiritual DNA.

The early church father, Athanasius, (from the late 200's), said that while most scripture speaks *to* us, this Psalm speaks *for* us. It takes the words out of our mouths (if we were so able to formulate them), and gives us words to convey and communicate our faith.

The Psalm is typical of ancient literature that freely mixes metaphors, yet with clear method in it: there is movement, and the progression is positive.

There are three sections, each section ending with *selah*, indicating a pause, to take it all in... to consider the wonder of what has been said.

God is our **refuge**- our safe place.

God is **our help**- We will not be shaken.

... God is **with us**. To take all this in, we need to 'be still', or, in Robert Alter's remarkable rendering- to 'unclench' our hands- to even unclench our lives from those things we otherwise hold on to, sometimes with a death grip; prejudice, silence, complacency. To let God be God puts us in the passenger's seat- and sees God, rightly in the driver's seat.

Since Ultimate Reality -God's love- embraces us, the more we open ourselves up to love, the closer we come to how God intends for us to live.

Now- I don't want to take anything for granted about the deeper meaning of this Psalm, so it may be helpful to take a short walk through how it has been understood through history; a good lesson for us today.

As I mentioned before, Psalm 46, for many, harkens back to the person of Martin Luther- who we will have a good look at in our Adult Seminary series later in September, as we come upon the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Luther's rendition of a "A Mighty Fortress" has been called the "Battle Hymn" of the Reformation, and was even used as a battle cry in the Reformation. Luther did not regard it that way at all.

He wrote this as a hymn of comfort -a "trost" Psalm, (in German) the title on its first printing in Augsburg. He saw this Psalm as an affirmation of his worth in God's eyes, as a child of God equal to any other. He found God, unexpectedly, not in judgement, but in love.

A brief summary of Luther's life and journey might be helpful to understand how he was inspired by this Psalm.

In some ways, Luther's is an 'archetypal' journey- a pattern that many people follow in their own ways, looking to find meaning and purpose in life. (A far better way than carrying Tiki torches, shouting racist slurs.)

Martin Luther was born into a German peasant family. His father, an iron and copper miner, had aspirations of moving into the middle class. As an only son, Martin had high expectations to fulfill. He grew up feeling he could never do enough to please his father or to prove his worth. He didn't succeed in law school as his father had hoped, and in later becoming a monk and even a Doctor of Theology, he felt he wasn't able to please God any better. Hard as he tried, young Luther failed (at least in his own eyes) to earn the approval of family members, teachers and superiors, even God. He simply wasn't able to measure up to the demands placed upon him, imagined or otherwise. He kept searching, deeper and deeper in scripture.

One night in 1512, as he read the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans in the tower room of the cloister in Wittenberg, he was stunned by the image of a gracious God. He suddenly realized that God's acceptance of him wasn't based on anything he could *do*. He was accepted solely for what he *was*, incomplete and inadequate as that might be. Theologically, he describes this as being justified by faith rather than works.

All he had to do what ‘accept his acceptance’- as a later theologian (Paul Tillich)- put it. Luther discovered a relationship with God that wasn’t based on meeting expectations, but rather on the surprising assurance that God delights in the weak, even more than the strong, in the humble more than the proud, God’s love comes freely despite God’s awesome greatness.

To illustrate, he remembered a story from a time, when as a struggling young student in Erfurt he was singing in the streets of the city, hoping for handouts of money or food (such was the lot of students back then.) A butcher suddenly came running out from a nearby shop, furiously waving sausages in the air, oddly yelling at everyone in noisy jest: “Why is everyone making such a racket? Sausages, sausages, take my sausages!” The butcher laughed as he yelled, but Luther wasn’t sure how to respond. He badly wanted the sausages, but it was such an odd, fearful, unpredictable moment that he took up and ran.

Many years later, Luther, in his *Tabletalk* writings, in his words to his much younger students, wondered aloud if that experience wasn’t typical of our God and our response to God’s grace.

Like the butcher frantically waving sausages, he said, God holds out Christ to us, not seeking to frighten us, but to draw us to himself. All of his life, Luther had feared an angry, demanding God, only to discover in the end that God had been wanting to give and forgive all along.

It’s an odd, dated image for sure, but striking just the same.

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God is love, in more ways than we can imagine, over against any prejudice, evil or hate that comes our way. The Ultimate Reality of the universe is love, not hate, unity, not enmity, mercy not judgement.

Psalm 46 is an ode to ‘trost’ and comfort, all along.... God is for us, not against us...

Let’s be clear. Psalm 46 is realistic. It does not promise that we as God’s people will be free from the effects of nature or war or individual suffering. But it does promise that we will not have to go through these things alone.

“The LORD of hosts is *with* us, the God of Jacob is our refuge..”

Not in spite of our differences, but in and with them, God is with us as we continue to learn more about each other and share our lives together

**God is on our side;** Black, brown, and white; female, and male; citizen and immigrant, gay and straight, old and young... In Christ we are all one.

**God is by our side**- as our advocate; encouraging us all, each moment, each day, to welcome, to openness, to new curiosity, imagination and hope.

And in this,

**God's peace is inside**, - as we continually pray that the Lord will give us wisdom and guide us in the way of peace.

God has put all of his love and trust in us through Christ. We have nothing more to earn, but in our full confidence of God's acceptance of us, may now share that same love and acceptance with others.... with all who by God's grace we meet. In Jesus' name. Amen.