

## “GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH”

### Psalm 46

Our text for this morning is one of the most comforting, powerful, and familiar psalms in the Bible. You may have memorized it as a child, and turned to its promises amid the most difficult circumstances of your life. Martin Luther took refuge in this psalm during the perilous days of the Reformation; and based his great Reformation anthem, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, upon its words. Indeed, across the millennia, countless people of God have found this psalm to be “**a very present help in trouble**”—in wars, persecutions, and natural disasters; when facing sickness, death, or unimaginable loss.

Of course, the psalm to which I’m referring is Psalm 46:

**<sup>1</sup>To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of the sons of Korah. A Song for Alamoth. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. <sup>2</sup>Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; <sup>3</sup>though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling. Selah. <sup>4</sup>There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High. <sup>5</sup>God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn. <sup>6</sup>The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted. <sup>7</sup>The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah. <sup>8</sup>Come, behold the works of the Lord, Who has made desolations in the earth. <sup>9</sup>He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire. <sup>10</sup>Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth! <sup>11</sup>The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.**

In Psalm 46 you’ll notice the word SELAH at the end of verses 3, 7, and 11. SELAH is a Hebrew word that means “silence” or “rest.” Remember, the psalms were used in ancient Israeli worship much as they are used in our worship services. They were read responsively. They were set to music and sung. The word SELAH was really a directive to pause, be silent, and contemplate the verses just read or sung. This morning, let’s do the same. Let’s read verses 1-3, verses 4-7, and verses 8-11, pausing at each SELAH to reflect upon what Almighty God is telling us.

The first section, verses 1-3: **“<sup>1</sup>God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. <sup>2</sup>Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; <sup>3</sup>though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling. Selah.”**

What conditions do these words describe? Chaos and upheaval. And it really doesn't matter whether the chaos and upheaval are literal as in natural disasters—earthquakes, floods, tornados, famines, plagues, the destruction to befall the earth at the end of the age; or whether the images in Psalm 46:1-3 are figurative, that is, pictures of the chaos and upheaval in our individual lives. Both are true. Both will happen.

I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area when a 6.9 magnitude earthquake struck on October 17, 1989. I will never forget standing in a large parking lot, watching the asphalt ripple with seismic waves; watching the buildings sway; watching hundreds of parked cars rock back and forth, their lights flashing and horns blaring. Nothings creates a feeling of helplessness and mortality like the very ground shaking beneath one's feet.

But we often get that same sensation of helplessness and mortality from the events, problems, and personal “earthquakes” in our lives. The Hebrew word translated as “be removed” in Psalm 46:2 literally means “to be changed.” Though the earth be changed. And what causes more fear for human beings than the prospect of change?

Our lives are constantly changing; and it is the changeability of our lives that frightens us. Trading the vim and vigor of youth for the aches, pains, and prescription refills of old age. Losing that job. Going through that divorce. Filing that bankruptcy. Getting that medical diagnosis. Seeing loved ones wander away from the Word of God. Working hard for so many years, then struggling financially in retirement. Changes. Some good, others bad. Some expected, others stressful.

In 1967, a psychiatrist named Thomas Holmes developed a stress-rating system based on “life-changing events.” The rating system ranged from “0” to “100.” The higher the rating, the more stressful the event. The death of a spouse was rated “100;” divorce, “73;” imprisonment, “63;” personal injury or illness, “53;” joblessness, “47;” and so on through multiple life-changing events. Holmes believed that an accumulated score of “300” or more within a single year could not only cause health problems, but lead to a mental or physical breakdown. ‘We’re simply not built to manage that level of stress,’ he said.

And talk about changes, what of all the changes in our own country or around the globe? I've always craved information. But these days I have to force myself to watch, read, or listen to the news. The headlines are so depressing. Terrorist attacks. Wars. Riots. Political corruption. Natural disasters. Unspeakable crimes, such as the recent shooting in Annapolis, Maryland. Would it really surprise any of us if the headlines in the Dakota Herald read: EARTH REMOVED; or MOUNTAINS CARRIED INTO MIDST OF SEA; or WATERS ROARING AND TROUBLED?

The hymnist wrote: “Change and decay in all around I see.” The writer of Psalm 46 saw that change. We see that change. But how does the hymn stanza go on? “Change and decay in all around I see. O thou, who changest not, abide with me.” In such a volatile, changeable world, what greater comfort and refuge can we have than to know that our God does not change. **“I the LORD do not change,”** Malachi 3:6. **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,”** Hebrews 13:8. **“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows,”** James 1:17.

Our God does not change. This means that God does not love you today and hate you tomorrow. God is not for you today and against you tomorrow. God is not with you today and away from you tomorrow. He is, as Psalm 46 declares, **“a very present help in trouble;”** even when we’ve convinced ourselves that He is not present at all—that He is elsewhere in the universe, with more important problems to solve and more important people to help. That’s nonsense.

The Hebrew of Psalm 46:1 literally says that ‘God is always found to be a present help in trouble.’ And if you think back over your life, the good times and the bad, can you honestly recall a single instance when God was not a present or readily available help? I can’t. In fact, had God not been a present help through all the changes of my life, I would not be standing in this pulpit today. But God was present each time I turned to him. God was still present when I turned away Him. Can the same be said of anyone or anything else? No.

Sadly, people look for refuge and strength in all the wrong places: wealth, power, careers, relationships, possessions, addictions. All of these eventually fail. But God never fails. Never. And this is why the first word of Psalm 46 is one of the most important words in Psalm 46: **“God is our refuge and strength.”** God. Elohim in Hebrew.

Elohim is actually a plural word; not in the sense of many gods but in the sense of fullness. Fullness of power. Fullness of knowledge. Fullness of blessings. Fullness of presence. This is why, God is why, you and I can confidently say, **“Therefore we will not fear.”** We will not fear sickness. We will not fear growing old. We will not fear what others say about us. We will not fear death. We will not fear loneliness. We will not fear economic downturns. We will not fear terrorists, or the nations who rage, or the changeability of life itself. We will not fear, because God—Elohim—is our refuge and strength.

What a tremendous, comforting, and liberating thought. And I can easily understand why this majestic thought is followed by a SELAH. It isn’t enough just to recite these words: **“God is our refuge and strength.”** You and I recite similar words almost every Sunday.

Consider the historic liturgy in our hymnals. Hymnal, p.5: “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Hymnal, p. 6: “Almighty God, our Maker and Redeemer.” Hymnal, p.12: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” Then the service ends. The lights are turned off. We exit the church building, suddenly acting as if God had no power and no control over daily lives and even trivial problems. Don’t let this happen today. Don’t leave here worrying, “What if this happens? What if that happens?” Take this SELAH from Psalm 46:3 home with you. In its silence, contemplate the power and majesty of God in your life.

The second section of Psalm 46, verses 4-7: **“<sup>4</sup>There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High. <sup>5</sup>God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved. God shall help her, just at the break of dawn. <sup>6</sup>The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved. He uttered His voice, the earth melted. <sup>7</sup>The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.”**

If the first section of Psalm 46 assures us of God’s infinite power at work in our lives, then the second section assures us of God’s willingness to act and His personal involvement in our lives. In fact, these two great realities—God’s power and God’s personal involvement—are wonderfully addressed in verses 6 and 11 of Psalm 46. God is not only called the LORD of hosts or armies He is also called the God of Jacob. Isn’t that amazing? Isn’t that uplifting? God not only identifies Himself as the LORD of hosts but also as the God of a single individual; personally involved in our individual lives and problems.

For many years, I wrote a weekly sermon summary I called the After-WORD Devotion and emailed it to thirty or forty people. One day I received a heartwarming note from a person on my distribution list. She said, ‘Every week I look forward to logging into my email during break-time at work and seeing your After-WORD devotion. So many times it seems that the message is direct from God to me. It is more of a comfort to know that God sends these words to me exactly at the time I need them most, without me realizing it until I read them.’

God does give us the right words at the right time; in the language of Psalm 46, He helps us **“just at the break of dawn.”** As this past week progressed; indeed, as I was finishing this sermon late Saturday afternoon, I suddenly realized that God had given me the right words for my son Andrew as well. “I’ve been praying so hard,” Andrew told me; “praying to see God’s involvement in my problems and goals; praying to see evidence that God cares.”

I reminded him of the words of Psalm 46. I reminded him that not only does God have all power to help, but all willingness to help; that God is not only the LORD of hosts, but the ‘God of Andrew’ as well. “That’s one of his names, too, son,” I told him. He is also ‘the God of Andrew.’ And I’m certain he is delighted to be known by that name.” Just as God is also

delighted to be called your God, and to be associated with the personal name of every other believer in Christ.

“God in our midst” and “God on our side” is the constant refrain of Scripture. We see this in our text for today: **“God is in the midst of her; God shall help her.”** We see it in other psalms like Psalm 27: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” And where do we see God more in our midst and more on our side than in coming of our Lord Jesus Christ?

The apostle Paul saw Jesus as the indisputable evidence that God is at work and personally involved in our lives, saying in Romans 8:31-32, **“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, long with Him, graciously give us all things?”** Romans 8:31-32.

Believe this, dear friend, and nothing—not pain, hardship, loss, life, death; not even the gates of hell itself—will move or defeat you. As God promised in Psalm 46, ‘You will not be moved. You will stand firm.’

And finally, the third section of Psalm 46, verses 8-11: **“<sup>8</sup>Come, behold the works of the LORD, Who has made desolations in the earth. <sup>9</sup>He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire. <sup>10</sup>Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth.’ <sup>11</sup>The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.”**

Much could be said about these verses. In an age of wars and rumors of wars; terrorist threats; the swaggering and boasting of nations and their leaders—Putin, Al Qaeda, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, whatever the names or organizations; how comforting to remember that God is in complete control; that **“He makes wars to cease; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire.”** But as we close this morning, I particularly want to direct your attention to Psalm 46:10. In this verse, God turns to us directly as says, **“Be still and know that I am God.”**

If you’ve ever read *Alice in Wonderland*, you may remember the Red Queen saying, “But here, you see, it takes all the running you can to keep in one place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run twice as fast.” This is how we so often feel in life—as if we are running in place, sweating, consuming energy, but going nowhere. Sometimes we are simply overwhelmed by the pace and pressures of modern living: traffic jams, overtime at the office, deadlines, appointments, commitments, errands; even the three hundred channel choices on our digital TVs.

At other times, we run in place by worrying. In fact, the New Testament Greek word for worry is MERIMNAO, which literally means “to have a divided mind.” And this is precisely what happens when we worry. Our minds are torn in multiple directions by multiple what-ifs. “What if I get sick? What if I lose my job? What if I can’t pay the mortgage or buy groceries?” The type of questions we all end up asking. But this is our nature and the nature of our world. As the Red Queen said, “But here, you see, it takes all the running you can to keep in one place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run twice as fast.”

God has different advice. When we find ourselves overloaded with problems and overwhelmed with worries, God doesn’t say, ‘Come on now; hurry up. Pick up the pace. Run twice as fast.’ God says, **“Be still and know that I am God.”** And this, dear friends, is the type of SELAH—contemplative silence and reflection—that we need most of all. Be still. Stop fidgeting. Stop worrying. Stop talking. Start listening. **“God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear.”**

We will not.