

Psalm 46

Reformation, October 27, 2024
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, ³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. ⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. ⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. ⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. ¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Psalm 46 is the first in a series of three psalms which were written as songs of praise to the Lord for delivering His people from their enemies. And while we don't know specifically which time of deliverance the Psalmist is thinking of here, we can certainly think of many occasions for which this Psalm would be a fitting description. Because, throughout Israel's history, we see episode after episode of the Lord having mercy on His people and delivering them from the jaws of death.

I want to diverge from our sermon text for a bit and relate to you one such deliverance from Israel's history. It was from the Assyrian emperor by the name of Sennacherib. About 700 years before Christ, Sennacherib led a force of several hundred thousand soldiers from Assyria, which was northeast of Israel, down to Egypt to conquer that nation—Egypt being to Israel's southwest. Naturally, that led them right through the region in which the people of Israel dwelt, and sort of as a small side-conquest, Sennacherib sent a portion of his troops to conquer and claim Jerusalem. He saw Jerusalem as it was: a city set up on a hill that rose up above the surrounding countryside, a fortified and proud city—Sennacherib just couldn't leave that proud fortress alone! He had to bring it to its knees.

Now, the leader in Jerusalem at the time was King Hezekiah, whom we read about in our Old Testament reading. Soon before Sennacherib arrived, Hezekiah had just carried out his own reformation efforts among the people of Judah. He'd torn down the pagan altars dedicated to false idols that dotted the Judaeen countryside. He had cleaned out the temple, as we already read, and had it rededicated to the service of the Lord. It was in the face of fierce opposition from his own people that he proclaimed that they should no longer worship their own household gods; there was only one *true* God! And they should worship Him at the temple in Jerusalem, as God had said.

So, it was around this time that Sennacherib sent troops to taunt King Hezekiah and to make fun of Hezekiah's God. (cf. 2 Kings 18:19-35) A general acted as the spokesman for Sennacherib and spoke to the people of Jerusalem, saying, "Don't be tricked into believing your God can save you. In fact, wasn't your king tearing down your God's altars all around the countryside?" (Those *weren't* altars to the one true God, but the Assyrians didn't know that.) And then he tells outright lies, saying, in essence, "It was *actually* your God who commanded the King of Assyria to destroy Jerusalem! We have a long history of conquering other countries and humiliating their gods; no god has been able to save anyone from us. And your God is no different than those we've already conquered. What makes you think your God can save you?"

And King Hezekiah was worried, and who could blame him? But he didn't panic, he didn't give in—he looked to God's Word for answers. He turned to the prophet Isaiah to ask him what God would have them do. And Isaiah said, "Don't budge. Don't move a muscle." God would save the city, the king, and the people—not because they *deserved* it, but because He was a God of grace.

Well, Sennacherib's messengers reported back to him that Hezekiah was unwilling to surrender, and Sennacherib wrote back this ultimatum: ***“Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction. And shall you be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed?”*** (2 Kings 19:10-12)

Hezekiah received that letter, went straight to the temple and spread it out on the floor, saying, "Lord, do You see this? Are you going to let Sennacherib mock You this way? Yes, the Assyrians are powerful. But You can save us!" Then Isaiah came and told Hezekiah that God had heard his prayer. Jerusalem would be delivered. And it happened. Sennacherib had a force of 185,000 soldiers outside the wall of Jerusalem, and the angel of the Lord swept through the camp and decimated it. In disgrace, Sennacherib fled home where he was assassinated by his own sons.

Sennacherib was on the receiving end of some of the truths that God proclaims in our text. ***“The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; [God] utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”*** The most powerful force on earth at the time was brought to nothing before the LORD. Now, Martin Luther wrote the great Reformation hymn, *“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,”* based on this Psalm. And we're going to borrow a line from that hymn to serve as our theme today. It's a statement that was true in Hezekiah's day, it was also clearly true in Luther's day, and it's still true for us *today*. Our sermon theme this morning is: **For Us Fights the Valiant One.**

Now, when we depart the building this morning, I'm just assuming that there won't be 185,000 pagans waiting outside to try and kill us. But we certainly have our fair share of threats. There are the impersonal ones like storms and viruses and economic uncertainty. Then there are the personal ones, like people across our country who would love to censor what is preached out of this pulpit and brand Christians like us as bigots and ignorant and all sorts of other things. There are uncertainties related to health, related to our congregation, related to personal finances. Nevertheless, even faced with all this opposition, God tells us that we are not to be afraid. The Psalmist writes: ***“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.”***

All of those examples are describing cataclysmic *change*. And certainly, everything in our world is rapidly changing. Politics, weather, society, political correctness, morality, inflation, even pastors change—it's all rapidly changing! But we don't need to get worked up over all that, we don't need to *fear* any of it, because we have that very present help in every time of trouble. We have the *LORD* with us, and *He* promises, ***“I the LORD do not change.”*** (Malachi 3:6)

Well, it's easy to talk about not being afraid in the midst of change, it's another thing to actually live

without fear. Doubt and fear are the inevitable results of the sin that dwells within us. We do often live in fear of disasters and viruses and death and enemies of Christ. We *do* worry and feel afraid of the future when uncertainty and change creeps into our lives. Maybe some of us are better at hiding that fear than others, but fear has gripped us all.

But in the midst of all these troubles, as the world around us and maybe even we melt away in fear and anger, this Psalm presents Christians with a different picture of reality: ***“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 her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.”*** Throughout human history, people have been drawn to the water. For ages, lakefront property has been in high demand. There’s very calming about being out on a boat in the middle of lake. It’s easy to forget your problems for a while when you are walking along the beach and hearing the waves lap up against the shore. And that’s really the picture of this Psalm. Outside the city walls of God’s Church, the world may be in turmoil. But *inside*, we have the peaceful river that calms all our fears.

And I think you all know what that source of peace is—that’s our Savior. When we are able to look at Him and be reminded of the surpassing peace of God which He’s awarded to us, everything else just doesn’t seem as important anymore. I’m reminded of the Apostle Paul’s words to the Philippians: ***“I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”*** (Philippians 5:11-13) Paul could say this because he understood that while still in the world He already stood in the presence of God. Where God’s Word was being preached, where the Lord’s Supper was distributed, there God was present proclaiming that peace belonged to Paul. And, so it is for us, *too*. We can hold onto this one unchangeable truth: through Christ’s death on the cross, we have been forgiven. And *with* that abiding truth, we can afford to put all other distractions to the side.

Speaking of distractions, we all know that our nation is in the midst of an election. And as you listen to the public discourse, boy, it sure sounds like the Psalmist could be describing America in 2024. ***“The nations rage, the kingdoms totter.”*** Our country is raging and tottering with such hatred and violence; you listen to the discourse and apparently our country is going to fall apart depending on who gets elected. Well, personally, I think it’s good to just mute the TV sometimes rather than getting swept up in all that. But even better yet, let’s listen to God’s discourse instead: ***“He utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”***

In other words, be still and *do not* fear, because **For Us Fights the Valiant One**. And we need look no further than the cross of Christ to see the glorious truth of these words. When the devil raged against God, when the kingdoms of this world conspired together with him against Jesus Christ and put on a sham trial in a kangaroo court and nailed God to a cross—do you think that they believed they had won? I’m sure they did, but they didn’t realize that they were fighting against the Valiant One. This was God Himself, and He would not be defeated in His quest to pay for your sins. And He used that cross of humiliation to gain us the victory. By it, He did the very thing the devil was hoping to prevent, and He forgave us all our sins and swung open to us the doors of heaven.

Time and again throughout history, we see the devil still working through the kingdoms of this world to try and undermine the LORD. In King Hezekiah's day, just at a time when the devil knew the people of Israel were starting to turn back to God, he sent the most powerful force on earth at the time, and he was defeated. In Martin Luther's day, when a lone monk was standing up for the saving Word against the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church—he was outnumbered, but he was not outgunned, because He had the most powerful weapon of all: the Word of God. And for Luther fought the Valiant One. God ensured that His Word would remain so that centuries later, people like you and me could gather here and rejoice in the full forgiveness which is freely given.

And today, the Valiant One is still fighting for us. No matter what happens in any election, no matter how dark things seem to be getting, no matter how much the nations rage or the kingdoms totter, even in the midst of change—if the earth gives way and the mountains are moved into the heart of the sea—there is *nothing* that can harm those who are in Christ Jesus. The world can torture and kill, but Christ has overcome the world. God has defeated the powers of sin, death, and the devil. And so, all those raging powers and all the struggles and pain they cause for us can do nothing to change the fact that Jesus was crucified, that Jesus was raised, and that your baptisms have connected you to Him.

Now, there will come a day when all these things end. After all, the Psalmist promises, ***“He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. Be still, and know that I am God.”*** There will come a day when all of this turmoil will cease. That will be the day when Jesus returns. He has promised to return to take you to Himself. He has promised, and so He *will* do it.

In the meantime, then, while you're still here enduring the tremors of the world, I would invite you to come into the presence of God, just as King Hezekiah did. And it's not just me who invites you, God does as well: ***“Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”*** (1 Peter 5:7) You can take those worries and those problems, whatever it is that causes you anxiety, you can take the insults of the world and of the devil and spread them out before the Lord, leaving them to Him. And then you can turn to Him and claim His promises for yourself—He *promises* to deliver you from the evil that you yourselves are unable to handle. So, with His help, you do not need to be intimidated by the threats of the devil or of any uncertainty, because the victory is now and forever yours.

Therefore, our response to every change can be just like that of the reformer Hezekiah and his people. We can sing a song of victory and proclaim, ***“The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”*** Or we can sing in the words of the reformer Martin Luther, ***“For Us Fights the Valiant One.”*** In Him, the Valiant One—our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord—in Him we will not be put to shame. In Him, there's nothing to fear. Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.