

## God is Our Refuge and Strength: A Psalm in Time of Crisis

Ps. 46, Mark 4: 35-45

Today's psalm is a psalm in time of crisis: personal crisis, national crisis, global crisis. One might say we've never seen a time like this: a worldwide health crisis, a political crisis with political upheaval and fears about the fate of democracy in America, with the very idea of truth and facts being undermined. But such times have come before.

These are times, scripture says, when everything is shaken so that "what cannot be shaken may remain (Hebrews 12:27)." These are days of a great shaking, and we search for the things that cannot be shaken. Psalm 46 is a psalm for such a time.

### I

In 1919 the Irish poet W.B. Yeats wrote one of the most famous poems of the modern era, "The Second Coming." It pictured a world in upheaval at the end of World War I. Here are some of the lines:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;...  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, which the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.<sup>1</sup>

How do we live in such a time? Shakespeare's Hamlet says, when he learns his uncle has murdered his father: "The time is out of joint". This may seem like our time today. The psalmist calls us to faith in such times. God is still God, and the center shall hold.

God is our refuge and our strength,  
a sure help in time of trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.

An earthquake hit San Francisco in 1989. A physician said, "Everyone there felt the earth move—and the earth should not move." A five year old girl said "Mommy, this isn't supposed to happen"

Who has not felt, in a larger sense, the earth move these last few years? *Terra firma* has not felt so *firma*. What we thought was stable and reliable seems up for grabs. We get dizzy with disorientation.

Who can forget the morning of 9/11 and watching the passenger planes fly into the Twin Towers, then watching the giant towers collapse? "This can't be happening!"

On the Sunday after 9/11, churches across the nation reached for Psalm 46 and sang Martin Luther's hymn based on the psalm:

A mighty fortress is our God,  
a bulwark never failing;  
our helper he amid the flood  
of mortal ills prevailing.

Then later

And though the world with devils filled  
should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us.

We needed that psalm and that hymn that Sunday, and we need them today.

Though the world is in tumult, God is still God. As another hymn of faith says:

This is my Father's world:  
O let us not forget  
that though the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God is the ruler yet.

The public health of the world may take a while to regain its health; the toxins in the body politic may take awhile to work themselves out of our politics; the institutions of our society may be close to crumbling, but better ones may take their place. God is the ruler yet.

The psalm calls us from fear to faith. In our gospel lesson Jesus and his disciples set out onto the Sea of Galilee. A storm suddenly arose, and their boat began to be swamped with water. The disciples were scared for their lives. Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat. They shook him awake and said, “Teacher do you not care if we perish?” Jesus stood up and said to the sea and wind, “Peace, be still.” The storm subsided, and all was calm. Jesus said to them “Why were you afraid? What happened to your faith?” One of them might have said, “That’s easy for you to say!” We may want to take the side of the disciples. When we fear for our lives and panic sets in we may question everything.

See the story today as a parable of moving from fear to faith. Everyday we choose to live by faith or by fear. Fear can make us do terrible things. Sometimes the fear is worse than the storm. In the midst of the storm Jesus says to our hearts and minds, “Peace, be still.” There are inner storms and outer storms, and Jesus comes to bring peace to both.

## II

The psalmist now begins a second stanza. He moves us into the holy city of God, that place where we dwell with God and God dwells with us:

There is a river whose streams  
make glad the city of God,

the holy place where the Most High dwells.

God is in the midst of her;

she shall not be moved;

God will help her when the morning comes.

Where is this place? Can there be such a place? For centuries the Hebrew people believed Zion was that place, the holy city of Jerusalem and the temple of God. But a thousand years after this psalm was written the Roman army came and destroyed both city and temple. We can put our trust in what we have built. Better, we seek a city, to use the words of Hebrews, “that has no foundation, whose builder and maker is God. (Hebrews 11:12).”

The prophet Ezekiel and John the writer of Revelation picture such a city, with a river that flows from the throne of God. And along the river on both sides are trees whose leaves are for “the healing of the nations.” This is the dream of God, and not just for heaven but for earth. We need God’s dream as we join in God’s purposes for the world.

Langston Hughes, the poet of the Harlem Renaissance and one of America’s greatest poets wrote a poem called “Dreams”, which later inspired Martin Luther King, Jr.”

Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

The psalm says this city of God is in our midst as God is in our midst. And there is a river that flows among us and within us bringing life and peace. Jesus met a woman of Samaria drawing water at a well. Jesus said to her:

Everyone who drinks this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I give will never thirst. It will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

She said, “Sir, give me this water!” Are we willing to put down our human buckets we think can save us to drink of the water Jesus gives?

God is in the midst of the city. That city dwells within each of us; there is a temple within. Jesus is that temple. Jesus is the flowing river. He is the center that holds.

### III

The third stanza of the psalm moves to our God who is the God of peace.

The psalmist says:

Come consider the works of the Lord,  
God makes the wars cease to the ends of the earth.  
God breaks the bow and shatters the spear,  
God burns the chariots with fire.

This is what God is up to in history. The question is, What are we up to? Are we dismantling the weapons of bows and spears and the chariots?

Now come the most repeated words of the psalm: “Be still and know that I am God.” We often use these words in the spiritual sense of stilling our hearts and minds so that we may draw close to God. But the original sense, and the sense that is most important for us today is very different. It is about following the God of peace who breaks the bow and shatters the spear.

The literal meaning of “Be still” is, “Let your hands go slack.” Let go of your weapons, let them fall to the ground.

We're talking not only about the weapons of war, but the other kinds of weapons we use that hurt others. The weapons we use to defeat others, the weapons we use to try to defend ourselves. These are the weapons of our words and actions that come from the violence of our minds and hearts. Almost all are forged out of fear. In contrast, the psalmist trusts God whose love is our savior and strength.

Somedays we run head long into our battles to save ourselves. But God says, "Hold your horses. Be still. Trust in me." In "A Mighty Fortress is Our God", one verse goes "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing." The way of Jesus is the way of peace, trusting in God more than we trust ourselves. Ghandi said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." And I'd add, "A tooth for a tooth, and the whole world needs dentures."

Jesus taught us another way: Live in love and trust God with the rest. One of my preacher heroes is Fred Craddock, both for his unforgettable sermons and for his writing about preaching. Later in life he said:

When I was in my late teens, I wanted to be a preacher. When I was in my late 20's, I wanted to be a good preacher. Now that I am older, I want more than anything else to be a Christian. To live simply, to love generously, to speak truthfully, to serve faithfully, and to leave everything else to God.



That's what I hear in the psalm today: Do your best to follow in the way of Jesus, and leave everything else to God.