

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 46

Sunday, July 19, 2020
Rev. Mark Hovermale

Announcement by Rev. Emily Campbell

Friends, it is with joy and thanksgiving that I share with you the plans of our church's reopening for live worship services in August! What I'm sharing with you today reflects our Plan A, and keep in mind as Covid cases rise, we will continue to monitor this plan, and we will adjust it as needed. In every way the health and safety of our members and visitors to this congregation is our highest concern. But our Plan A, as of now, stands like this. On August 2nd we will open the church doors for Sunday worship services.

In August, this will reflect a gradual reopening, which means for the first two weeks in August, August 2nd and 9th, we will offer one worship service only, which will take place at 9:30 AM. Keep in mind if this practice goes well, we hope on Sunday, August 16th to expand to two worship services which means the second service would be held in the Upper Room. We will continue to adjust the plan, depending on demand and where we stand in terms of health and safety precautions, but keep in mind that our worship services will be in abridged form at approximately 35 minutes. Each will reflect best health practices, in that face masks and social distancing will be required at all services.

Beginning Monday July 27th, there will be an opportunity for you to reserve your space, either online or through the phone, for that very first August 2nd worship service taking place in the sanctuary at 9:30 AM. More details will follow in coming weeks, but right now we ask for your prayers as we seek to reopen the church. We pray that you will continue to join us, be it online, as our online services will continue throughout August and beyond, or in person. Either way, we hope to see you soon.

Rev. Mark Hovermale

Let us pray. Lord, we come before you this morning and we thank you so much for the gift of worship. Thank you for the gift of warm weather and for this congregation and for the people in it. As we come before you today and worship, we pray that we truly bring praise and honor to you as we look at Psalm 46, and know you are our refuge and strength. We specifically pray for wisdom with all involved in the reopening of our church to in-person worship. We pray for wisdom in all those decisions, as we come before you. May we praise your name this morning. Amen.

One of the giants of the Psalms is Psalm 46. We will be looking at two major sections of the scripture in our short time today. We are going to be looking specifically at two insights from each section. You are going to learn that initial study threw me for a little bit of a loop. When I studied it in depth, I realized the direction I was going to go in was *not* the direction that the scripture intended me to go.

Rev. Emily Campbell Reads the Scripture

Today our scripture lesson is from Psalm 46. We begin by reading Psalm 46, verses 1 through 3.

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with surging.

Our scripture reading continues now later in the Psalm, beginning at verse 9,

“He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; He burns the shields with fire. He says, ‘Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth!’ The Lord almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

Friends, this is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Mark Hovermale

Psalm 46 is such a great passage of scripture. About four or five months ago, I actually preached on the first three verses of the psalm. Today, we are looking at those first three verses and the end of the Psalm, too. There are about eleven verses in the whole Psalm.

In this amazing Psalm, the first part talks about God is our refuge and our strength, our ever-present help in trouble. It talks about when the mountains might fall and crumble and all these things happen, and yet God is our refuge and strength. This whole Psalm was really a celebration of the security of Jerusalem as the city of God. This specific passage inspired Martin Luther's great hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God”

It also was something like a liturgy back then. If you can imagine this whole passage, people would say the first three verses, and then the middle three verses--which we're not covering today--a reader or leader would read, and then the people would recite the last few verses. So, it was a liturgical back-and-forth, between a choir and the people and a leader. It was set up for worship that way.

Now I want to look at the passages in the first three verses, *in reverse*, if that makes sense. The first section of this passage of scripture looks at upheaval and disaster. The mountains fall into the sea and the mountains shake. What is interesting is that these images are not random. The writer is specifically using these images, based on the culture back then. As I read and studied theologians about this passage, I gained some insight. As I read my notes here, it says the change in the earth described in verses 2-3 seems kind of like a 10.0 earthquake and a class 5 hurricane, but actually even worse. We learn that the ancient near-eastern view of the universe was that the mountains kept the water at bay in the foundations of the earth, and they kept the sky held up. That was their belief--that the mountains did that. Thus, for those people in that time period, you can imagine that the worst thing possible to see would be for the mountains to crumble and shake, because not only would that be problematic, because the sky would fall, in their opinion, but also they would be in danger from the water below.

When you understand this context, it is actually more like a contemporary doomsday scenario, like a nuclear winter, that you see in movies. That is the description that is being used here. Now, let us go back to the first line. The first line says, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble”. The concept that God is our refuge, strength and help is pretty powerful. When you look at this idea of everything collapsing--a doomsday scenario, and then the writer saying before that, that God is our refuge and strength, that is powerful!

A couple of insights for you. The first one, the word “strength” used in the original language, points to the conviction of God's *sovereignty*. This means it is not *our* strength the passage is talking about at all. It is *God's strength, His sovereignty*. That is what the original word for “strength” meant.

Now, in Psalm 46, these first three verses also affirm something really powerful. You have to know the original language to understand. Almighty God is not some neutral power in the universe, looking down on us, going, “Well, we'll see what happens.” Clearly, if you read the passage in the original text, it says in Hebrew, “God is for us, a refuge and strength”. God is *for* us, a refuge and strength. That is how it would read in the Hebrew. Did you catch that God is *for* you; he is not neutral? In this game, he is *for* you. We cannot make it on our own. *We cannot make it on our own!*

If you look at it a different way, we need God. My favorite band is U2. I absolutely love them! I have seen them probably 30 times in concert. (I know--pathetic!) The lead singer, Bono, has a song they sing. It is called, "Sometimes You Can't Make It On Your Own", and it's amazing! But it is only half true because it's not "sometimes you can't make it on your own". You can *never* make it on your own! We *need* God. He is a refuge and strength. That is what the first three verses are really sharing with us this morning.

Now the second part we are going to look at today is actually the last three verses of the Psalm—verses 9-11. That passage talks about God "makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear". Then, the passage that is so great, "Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth!" It talks about "He is our fortress; He is with us". This is where it started getting interesting for me. I looked it up, and the words "be still" in Hebrew literally means "*Enough*"! Like when my kids are arguing and I yell, "Enough"! That is what "be still" means.

When you really study the text, you can learn that where you are going was not where you should have been going or where you should have gone. So, let me read to you exactly what I studied, that changed my mind. Then I want to share a couple of insights with you. In the ancient near-east it was a particular responsibility of rulers to establish peace for their people. This is precisely what God's words involve in verses 9 and 10. You cannot look at "be still" without looking at verse nine. I am like, "okay", and then I went on to read that although versions of the Bible retain this phrase because of its familiarity, "be still" is not a good translation. The research says contemporary readers will almost inevitably hear it as a call to meditation or relaxation. That is where I was going to go. It *should* be heard, in the light of verse 9, something like, "Stop! Throw down your weapons. Depend on God instead of yourselves". I read that and I went, "Oh no! That's not where I was going". You see I threw a wrench into my great plans of working ahead. I was going to talk to you about rest about quiet and stillness and how those attributes are just not around today but we need to embrace those, We need to become quiet before God can communicate, and in our busy culture we can't do that. Today, even though it has slowed down, it is still hard to get peace and quiet, and the message "be still" is forgotten. That *is* a good message, but it is not accurate to the text, "Be still, and know that I am God".

You have to know this. When I pray before I preach and before I write a sermon, I do not really pray that I will be engaging or entertaining or even get laughs or be good, as you would think a speaker should be. Instead, I pray that God will allow me to be true to the scripture.

By studying this text, I had my whole world reversed as far as the meaning of this text differs from what I *thought* it said. Based on what I just shared with you, we need to say "Enough"! We need to say, "Enough, and throw down our weapons. We are not at war! Have you been on social media lately, and I am talking about Christians, here? Everyone is in their own camps, maybe even at this church, but increasingly at large, especially. Right, left, or middle, they have opinions and there is no grace or compassion.

The weapons are not like literal weapons, but they are *words*--what we type, what we write, what we say, *they* are our weapons! We throw them and aim them at our fellow Christians and other people to support whatever viewpoint we have. We need to lay down those weapons of words of anger. Most people seem terribly angry today, for one reason or another. No matter on what side of the political spectrum or anything else you are, anger is a weapon! We, as Christians, need to lay down our anger and I am talking to *me* as well as *you*. I find my fuse is so short now, I get so mad over some of the simplest things. Lay down the weapon of anger! We are in our tribes now, so to speak. Everyone has got their political groups they are with, or their other groups they are with, and we almost are known, to be honest with you. for more what we believe about the 2020 political scape than we are for being Christians and being Christ-like.

It is okay to be involved. No matter which side, we should be known for being Christ followers first and, hey, what team we cheer for, or political group we are part of, or what movement we're part of--that is all secondary and way down the list compared to being known for being followers of Christ. That unifies us, no matter what we believe or who we vote for, or what team we cheer for, even if you are a Michigan State fan(!). We have got to get out of our tribes, we have got to lay the weapons of our tribes down.

The second thing, the second insight, is we need to *depend* on God instead of ourselves. *We need to depend on God instead of ourselves!* You are thinking, "Of course, Mark, you've got to say that". Absolutely! I am with you; it is easy to say, but really hard to do. If you asked, I would tell you I am totally depending on God, but I have got my Plan B. If God does not come through, I've got a plan here that'll help me out. Can you relate to that? I find a lot of comfort *outside* of God and his faithfulness. Let me say that again. Maybe you can relate; maybe you cannot. I find a lot of comfort *outside* of God and his faithfulness and it is embarrassing to say. You see when the bank account is a little higher, my comfort level is better. When it's a little lower, then all of a sudden I get nervous, feel anxiety. You know this: When my team is doing well, now I am feeling good; when it's not, then I'm not feeling so well. When my life is going smoothly, then, my comfort level, my confidence is going well. But when my life is hitting some rocky points, then my confidence is shaken. You see, now, those are all bad. I am getting my confidence and my comfort *outside* of God and his faithfulness. No matter where the bank account is, where the team is, how my life is going, God and his faithfulness, God, who's been faithful for generations, that's where I get my comfort and my strength from, *not* from those outside circumstances.

There is a lot packed into a short eleven verses in Psalm 46! It was written so long ago, but what do you take away this morning, watching wherever you are watching, in 2020? *We need, you need, to hear that God is your strength.* You need to know that, with the world seemingly in utter chaos and scrambling around us for all different things, you can take comfort that God is your refuge and strength. You need to hear that this morning. You need to hear that God, well, He is indeed *for you.* *God is indeed for you!* Maybe that is just what you needed to hear this morning. He is not just up there, watching; He is *for you.* He is your biggest fan!

Maybe you drew really close to the idea of what God said in this passage, "Be still," meaning "Enough!" "Enough and throw down your weapons!" Maybe you need to hear that—*you* need to throw down some weapons this morning, words, what you type, the groups you are a part of, what you are known for. Maybe that is what you need to hear!

Finally, maybe you needed to just hear the profound truth that you need to fully depend on God, no matter what success you have, or your financial situation, your power, your abilities. You do not take comfort in those; you do not take confidence in those. Your strength, your confidence, and your comfort come from God and his faithfulness. Maybe you need to hear that the beauty of this Psalm, and frankly, the Psalms in general, is that they pack a big punch with profound truth in just a few short verses.

I hope you found strength, hope, and comfort in Psalm 46 this morning.

Amen, and thanks be to God.