

Psalm 46 – Bible Study and Devotional

“A Song of Holy Confidence”

By Pastor Randy Mundt

Psalm 46 is one of my favorite psalms, and like Psalm 121, often is used at times of a funeral. It is a regular part of Jewish, Catholic, Anglican and Protestant liturgies. Some call this psalm "Luther's Psalm", as Martin Luther wrote his popular hymn "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God") as a paraphrase of Psalm 46. Luther's hymn has been quoted in many musical works, including Bach's cantata *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, BWV 80.

Originally, this psalm may have been composed after David defeated the enemies of ancient Israel from surrounding lands, most likely the Philistines. The psalm praises God for being a source of power and salvation in times of trouble. Interestingly, in Judaism, this psalm is prayed that all wars might cease.

This psalm is a good resource for us during this time of the Covid-19 pandemic. When all that we do seems like not enough, when we face enormous challenges and need help, we turn to God to provide us safe refuge from the powers of this world. I encourage you to read to psalm slowly the first time, and then follow the verse-by-verse breakdown thereafter.

Psalm 46 - New International Version (NIV)

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.**
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,**
- ³ though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.**
- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.**
- ⁵ God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.**
- ⁶ Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.**
- ⁷ The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.**

**⁸ Come and see what the Lord has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.**

**⁹ He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.**

**He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.**

**¹⁰ He says, "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 Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.**

Our Bible Study:

**¹ God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.**

Where do we turn to when faced with an overwhelming foe such as Covid- 19? If this pandemic has shown us anything, it is that we are not in control as much as we might have once believed. We need courage and strength, and we turn to God to give us what we cannot give ourselves.

Like with the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we often times struggle when life treats us in an unfair way. But like with those disciples, God is more present than we sometimes believe. Evil wants us to give up and throw in the towel. But God is here with us, ready to show God's presence – especially during the bleak times of a pandemic.

Our daughter, who runs a ministry that takes care of the homeless in Seattle, cries each week when she hears her mother's voice. Seeing so many people in line when she arrives at work (before 6:00 am) is overwhelming. Some will now have to be turned away for lack of space. She needs to lean into us as parents because she has no one else to confide in.

So too should we lean into God's mercy and grace during difficult times. When troubles come our way – as they will – we can feel the support of the One who gives us life and love. God's ever-present support is there when nothing else seems to be.

**² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,**

In the autumn of 2006, we had begun our second year of ministry on the Big Island of Hawaii when we experienced a 6.7 magnitude earthquake. Everything violently shook for what seemed like an eternity. It was a Sunday morning, and I was at church preparing for worship services. My daughter called me on the cell phone screaming hysterically. I quickly drove home dodging huge boulders and other debris that was scattered on the roadway.

Our house was badly damaged. The kitchen was a war zone where all our china had flown out of the cabinets and the fridge had thrown up. On the tile floor was broken glass and pottery everywhere. Half of our roof – cement tiles – had slid off to the back of the house. And that was a good thing, because had it come towards the front of the house, it would have likely killed my wife and daughter as they stood holding onto our car where they had thrown inside our new puppy.

The earth giving way – and the mountains being thrown into the sea – is a great description of an earthquake. Again, once you experience a strong earthquake, you realize just how big and powerful they are. When the world is literally falling apart all around you, it takes a special faith to get through it all. And that is the kind of faith that we need to have in God.

**³ though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.**

One of the things that happens with an earthquake near large bodies of water are tsunamis. With the earthquake in Hawaii, we had some small waves that did some damage along the shore. In Japan, however, the 3/11 Great Tohoku Earthquake did little damage, while the subsequent tsunami ravaged the shore and killed 20,000. Fukushima's four nuclear plants were badly damaged as the waters "roared and foamed".

One might call these tsunamis and the damage they incur as "collateral damage". We experience this all the time when something goes wrong. We may, in fact, do pretty well surviving the initial problem; it is the secondary events that some times cause us the most suffering. Some people say that bad things come in groups of three – this is precisely the fear that we might survive the first problem, but not the second or third ones.

**⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.**

Here is the contrast: waters that roar and foam are dangerous, and can cause injuries and death. But rivers and streams give life to most cities and towns; we need water for life. That is especially true in the Mideast where these psalms were written.

Note: Jerusalem and the Temple, although they were specific places, also functioned symbolically as visible signs of God's presence and power. To visit Jerusalem, to enter the Temple, was to be put in touch with God and with God's claim on the entire world. In short, in Psalm 46 we find the ultimate proclamation of God's universal reign.

**⁵ God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.**

Once again, we are told to trust in God. And once again, this is set in the background of something unsettlingly: nighttime. Many people fear the darkness; sometimes we are just tired after a long day. Because we rely on our sight to determine if we are safe or not, darkness presents a problem. Something could be going on in the darkness that might threaten us.

This pandemic is a time of darkness too. Who has the virus? What would happen if I (or someone I love) get this? There seems to be so much darkness in not knowing how this affects my life and my world.

So again the psalmist paints the picture of a sunrise for us. So many of our fears – real and imagined – seem to melt away when we experience the birth of a new day. And with a new day comes the hope of things getting better.

**⁶ Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.**

Where do we turn to when the world itself is in a mess? That is a poignant question given our times with this virus. History teaches us that no kingdom will last forever. History also teaches us that humans have a capacity to hurt one another.

So we turn to God, who spoke the world into existence in Genesis, and who can now speak and turn things around. I once read that the world continues to exist only because God continues to create. And when God stops creating, the world as we know will cease.

It is good news that God continues to create. Even in these days, God is creating situations where we can rely on one another. Working at Food Banks such as “Sharing with Sheridan” shows how badly we want to heal and assist others, especially during these difficult days. And we pray for the day when a vaccine can be created so that we can once again be with our loved ones.

**⁷ The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.**

The God who saved the Hebrew people and brought them out of drought and despair to Egypt is the same God who seeks to help us when we face hard times. There is so much to say about Jacob and his life – he is truly one of the most interesting people in the Hebrew Bible: cocky brother, arrogant dreamer, spoiled kid, etc. But the one thing that stands out to me about Jacob was how he trusted that even when he was sold into slavery, even when he was in jail in Egypt for nothing he did wrong, he trusted that this was part of God’s plan. Arabs, both Moslem and Christians, to this day end many sentences with the word “Inshallah”. That simply means “God willing”. This word shows that they recognize their dependence on God.

**⁸ Come and see what the Lord has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.**

Here we have an invitation to recognize what God is doing all around us. God is again still active in God’s creation. The word “desolation” means “left lonely,” “forlorn,” as in Psalms 25:16, “Have mercy upon me; for I am desolate”. Or in 1 Timothy 5:5, “she that is a widow indeed, and desolate” (meaning “left alone”). Again, the idea is that if God leaves us alone, tragedies such as war and destruction will be widespread. Only with God’s presence can we know true safety and true peace. Which leads us to . . .

**⁹ He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.**

God’s reign of peace is the Garden of Eden restored. When we try to be our own gods, we get ourselves into a heap of trouble. We think we have the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and we can be a better master for ourselves. But of course, history has proven otherwise. We can have peace, but only when we allow God into our hearts to prioritize “the other”.

I often think about what God thinks of countries that have weapons of mass destruction? I often then think of the words of Albert Einstein:
“The release of atom power has changed everything except our way of thinking...the solution to this problem lies in the heart of mankind.” And then: *“I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.”* ...

**¹⁰ He says, “Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.”**

Once again, we receive the invite to “be still”. Only through prayer and contemplation can we really slow our lives down to see that our only hope is in God. If this virus teaches us anything, it is we – even in our First World Country – need to rely on God because we are vulnerable. If we humble ourselves – which seems hard for us Americans to do sometimes – we will recognize how weak and unprepared we really are. The future comes to all people “un-announced” – and often in ways which we could have never seen or imagined.

**¹¹ The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.**

Once again, we are left with the best refrain of all: God is with God’s people. That is the truth found throughout the Bible. God is our fortress, especially during the most demanding and difficult times.

Conclusion:

Luther’s ramshackle cart wobbled its way to Worms, Germany, in April of 1521. He had been summoned to appear before the Emperor and Catholic prelates to give an account of this new “heresy” he was teaching called “justification by faith alone.” The learned Johann Eck laid out all of Luther’s writings and then asked Luther if he was prepared to recant.

Luther retired to his room that night to think over his answer. His Bible fell open to Psalm 46. Luther returned the next morning to stand before his detractors. In response to their call to recant, Luther responded with what some of the greatest and most profound words of history:

“Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”

Luther would turn to his trusted friend Philip Melancthon and exclaim: “Let’s sing the 46th Psalm, and let the devil do his worst!” As I mentioned in the introduction of this Psalm, it inspired his great hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”

No Psalm expresses the tremendous truth that God’s presence and power are with us in all circumstances more than Psalm 46. We need to know God offers us two kinds of help: a stronghold into which we can flee and a source of strength by which we can face the uncertain future. So we can truly say this day and every day: “Thanks be to God!”

Every new year brings us 365 days of uncertainty. Every new day brings us 24 hours of uncertainty. But every second of every hour of every day, God's presence and power in our lives is available to us. What does the future hold? It really doesn't matter, does it, as long as Psalm 46 is true! His Kingdom is forever!