

“Be Still”

Psalm 46 First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest July 4, 2021
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After Psalm 23, called “The Shepherd’s Psalm,” Psalm 46 is the second-most favorite psalm in the Bible. The reason for this is that both speak to the God who is with us—especially in times of trouble, danger or fear. This is what gives us comfort and strength. “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me,” says the author of Psalm 23, while the author of Psalm 46 says, “The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

Psalm 46 addressed a time of tension, trouble and change in the little kingdoms of Israel and Judah, which so often found themselves caught up in the geopolitics of the Ancient World. In Luther’s time, as France, England and Spain jostled for power and pre-eminence, the Wars of Religion were just starting—and they would last for 150 years. Nowhere would the fighting be more brutal than in Germany. Luther set the words of Psalm 46 to music in his hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” which became the anthem of the Protestant Reformation. These ancient words of calm and comfort still bring us assurance today.

The psalm, which is really a meditation, affirms that God is with us and will help us in times of trouble. The verses go on to describe both natural and political calamities that strike a chord within us as America celebrates its 245th birthday. Verse 2 states, “Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,” and for a lot of us, contemplating temperatures in British Columbia last week that approached 50 degrees Centigrade, it feels a lot like the earth is changing. Things like record-breaking heat, massive wildfires and drought, even earthquakes in the Midwest can be occasions for consternation and fear.

This week America left Baghram Military Airbase outside Kabul, Afghanistan as the forces of the Taliban inch closer to that nation’s capital. We’ve been at war there for nearly twenty years, and like the Russians and the British before us, we’ve learned the hard way how difficult it is to wage war or peace in this stubborn and fiercely-independent land. Some of you present today are remembering another war’s end: not in Kabul or Baghdad but in Saigon in 1975. Wars, you see, can be very easy to start, like World War One, but extraordinarily hard to end, like this, America’s longest war. And rarely are the endings inspiring to see.

Psalm 46 states that God “makes wars to cease to the end of the earth.” How deeply do we yearn for that! For a day when genuine peace will prevail on earth, as our little Peace Pole in our garden proclaims in four different languages.

But how does this happen, when “the nations are in an uproar,” and “the kingdoms totter,” as verse 6 states? There always has been a war or two going on somewhere in the world, but America has not been invaded since the British burned our nation’s Capitol in August of 1814. This year, we watched our Capitol assaulted by our fellow-citizens. And that astonishingly sad event has only served to exacerbate the deepening divisions within our own nation: the longest continuing, most powerful democracy in the history of the world. We’re still working on the “democratic” part, but with the Emancipation Act of 1863 and the 19th Amendment in 1920,

there is still reason to believe we won't start going backwards 100 years later. Our Constitution is and always will be our strongest bulwark of defense, but as Benjamin Franklin famously said about our fledgling democracy, we must find within ourselves the spirit and the will to keep it. The message of Psalm 46 can show us the way.

First, God promises to be with us in trouble, despite all the forces of change happening around us. This Pandemic has taught many of us the truth of this promise, as we have endured months of isolation and separation from loved ones. God has been with us. And God has seen us through.

Second, while this may be the God of shaking mountains and roaring seas—the God who can melt heaven and earth with just one word—this is also the God of peace, the God who comforts us by proclaiming our warfare is ended. How can this be? In the Kingdom of the heart, where we encounter God personally. Jesus said, “Don't let your hearts be troubled, and don't be afraid...peace I leave to you; my peace I give to you.”

That's what it means to “Be still, and know that I am God.” How do we truly “know” God? We encounter God through the wonders of Nature and the laws of the physical universe. We also come to know God through the moral Law set forth in the Bible. But we know God best in the person of Jesus, his Son, who taught us the power of forgiveness and by his resurrection gives us victory over all other powers that seek to do us ill, including ourselves. To “know” God this way is to “know” steadfast, enduring love. And to know that is to know Jesus—and work to make him known.

One last point about being “still.” In the Hebrew, it means quite literally to “drop your hands to your sides.” To bring down your fists and stand erect, without need of defending yourself. Why? Because God, the Lord of Hosts, has got that covered. You are resting safely in God's fortress now, the refuge of your soul and spirit, where no evil can befall you. So your fists come down; your fear melts away, and you are “still.” Your mind is quieted and at rest. And your heart, like a clear summer's morning, is filled with beauty and peace.

This is how we are meant to live with God, despite all the changes around us. And this is how we are meant to live with each other: there in the City where God lives—the Holy City which shall never be moved. We've been given a glimpse of it in Psalm 46 and in Revelation 22 as well. But we're not quite there yet. We're still on our way, and like Katherine Lee Bates, we can envision her alabaster walls and towers gleaming on the horizon of our hopes, undimmed by human tears. And until we all do get there, shall we not labor together to burnish her reflection here on earth, here in our own cities, where God is still with us, as we work to bring injustice, violence and suffering to end?

I pray we will all endeavor to do that on our nation's 245th birthday, not from a place of fear but from a fortress of strength, as we give God thanks for our heritage of freedom and praise for the promise of his grace.