

God Our Refuge

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Texts:

Psalm 46 (Used in the Call to Worship)

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

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 the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

Be still, and know that the Lord is God!

God is exalted among the nations;

God is exalted in the earth.

The Lord of hosts is with us;

The God of Jacob is our refuge.

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

6:1 Now this is the commandment--the statutes and the ordinances--that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,

6:2 so that you and your children and your children's children, may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.

6:3 Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

6:5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

6:6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

6:7 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

6:8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,

6:9 and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Mark 12:28-34

12:28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

12:29 Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

12:30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

12:31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

12:32 Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other';

12:33 and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' --this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

12:34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Sermon

The first draft of my sermon involved a very academic review of the Reformation, and the every-five-hundred year cycle of cataclysm and and change that scholars have traced in our religious history, concluding with some reflections on the state of the church today, 504 years after Luther began what we know as the Protestant Reformation. And if that's your jam, if that's what you're yearning for today, I'm happy to share that draft, and even a superb book on the topic (*The Great Emergence* by Phyllis Tickle). I think it's enormously important as we try to understand where we are, these days. But, folks, even as I wrote that sermon, it felt a little dry.

And, my heart kept coming back to the Psalm we associate with Martin Luther. Psalm 46, portions of which we read as our Call to Worship. This psalm has seen the faithful through many dangers, toils and strife and led Luther to call God a mighty fortress. This ode to God's strength and steadfastness spoke to Luther.

The world around Luther was changing and indeed he saw need for even more change, more reforming - but, the Psalm he clung to proclaimed that God is steady.

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea...

In our Bible Study we've just wrapped up six weeks in the Psalms, and certain themes emerged. The psalms reveal that people of faith in all times have been through joys and sorrows, have lived in doubt and fear, have wondered how they would get through. If it was okay for our ancestors in faith to pray every prayer, both the lovely and heartbroken, it is okay for us to bring our full selves to God. The psalms also proclaim a faith in God's steadfast love - God's *chesed* in Hebrew.

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea...
The Lord of Hosts is with us.

In the 16th century, Martin Luther picked up on the images of this psalm - and in the midst of his own spiritual affliction (apparently he invented a long German word just to describe his own angst - *Anfechtungen*). God is a bulwark, never failing.

Our faith has changed so much since Luther's day. We have moved past the easy naivete of God the omnipotent, completely in control and moving us around on the cosmic chessboard. I think most of us here would describe God the way Carter Heyward does, as "the eternally creative source of our relational power, our common strength, a God whose movement is to empower, bringing us into our own together, a god whose name in history is love." And yet...there is that word: strength. God is our refuge and our strength. Even for the 21st century progressive Christian, God is a source of strength, of hope, of love, a refuge in the storm. The solid, eternal God, always present to help us. Not the One who makes the plates of the earth's crust move and grate against each other - but nevertheless, the One who is unmoved when the earth does quake.

It feels as though the mountains have been shaking and the waters roaring and foaming for years. The earth has changed - a lot of that change has been our own making, from climate change to politics. The mountains have trembled, from literal earthquakes to the species-wide trauma of CoVid19 that just will not stop shaking us.

In the last 20 months we have dealt with change and we have changed. We have endured unimaginable loss - and we've had to change the way we grieve. Funerals postponed, held on line, or not at all.

There's not one of us on this planet un-impacted by the cataclysm of CoVid19, and not one aspect of our lives unchanged. Our family life, our sense of connection to friends and neighbors, our school life, our work life, even the way we grocery shop has changed in enduring ways. For church, we gathered online, and for many of us it was the first time we connected with God through a virtual platform.

We are learning to deal with continuous and unpredictable change. This was safe in July but it's not safe now; that is a risk we are willing to take because we have missed so much. One day the most important thing is to wash our hands; the next, wearing a mask; the next staying outside. And God bless our kids, who have been to school six different ways in two years.

The earth has changed and is changing. But God is in the midst of the city, the congregation, the country, the world. God is in the midst of change, and God's steadfast love endures forever as the Psalmist says to us again and again.

God, who in Clare of Assisi's words, loves us like a mother. This is the God who is our refuge in the storm. Who is a very present help in trouble.

This psalm is one person's witness, to a God who is solid, still, eternal, quiet, strong. But not only that - also a God who is active - one who makes wars cease to the end of the earth; breaks the bow, and shatters the spear...one who is our inspiration for peace, moving in hearts and minds, calling us to stop, to be still, to live in peace.

How do we know that? How do we know that God is steady, steadfast and strong? How do we experience God's mercy which endures forever?

A radical notion: sometimes we don't have a certain experience of God's presence. Remember, most of the psalms were laments written in moments when God seemed far away and the world seemed overwhelming. So when we ask, God, where are you, we are in good company. We are in the company of Mother Teresa, and John of the Cross, and Martin Luther. Even Jesus quoted Psalm 22 from the cross.

But if this does not satisfy, I can think of a few things to try to find God in the midst of change and grief and confusion. The first is to find the people who embody God's love. For surely they are all around us. The second is through God's beautiful creation. The third is through worship - music and beauty and ritual. And fourth - I almost said finally but God goes beyond any of my finally's - through prayer and mediation in which we reach out to God.

Psalm 46 ends this way, with an invitation to be still and know that God is God. And so I'll end the sermon with a moment for us to pray our way into God's steadfast love, strength and presence, though the earth should change...

Take a deep breath.

Be still, and know that I am God!

Be still, and know that I am...

Be still, and know that I...

Be still, and know that...

Be still, and know...

Be still...

Be...

Thanks be to God, our refuge and our strength. May we be still enough to be lifted by God's strength. Amen.