

Psalm 46 [NIV]

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to alamo. A song.

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.

Psalm 46 is our text for today, if you'd care to turn back there with me.

This has been quite a week, hasn't it? Of course, we knew it would be. That's why I asked last Sunday that we especially pray for the days and weeks ahead. Between the elections in Georgia and all that was *scheduled* to happen in Washington, that would have been enough, but as it turns out, it was all that *wasn't* scheduled that wound up affecting us, and not only us, but all the world, even more.

As I wrote yesterday [Pastor's Update email], of course, we stand against the violence and lawlessness – and all who instigated it – that was demonstrated this past Wednesday, just the same as we've spoken against all the violence and lawlessness – and those who've instigated it – that's occurred in months past. And as God calls us to do, we pray for those who are victims as well as for those who perpetrate, and for light and truth of God to come to bear on the underlying issues that provoke such behavior.

The sort of thing we saw happen Wednesday is, unfortunately, not such a terribly unusual sight in some places, some nations around the world. Some nations deal with those sorts of things fairly regularly.

But it is very unusual here, which is why the whole world has responded, expressing much shock over what happened.

But may I say to you, that it happened, and that it happened here, should not really be a shocking thing to anyone with any sort of Christian understanding and bearing, since we realize that this is what life is like in a fallen world, and especially so in a nation where so many of its leaders and people have all but turned their backs on God – if not on His existence entirely, at least on His real ability to affect the lives of people. Which means,

people will give lip service to him, but not really expect him to be real or to be in any way powerful.

What happened this past Wednesday is shocking to many only because we've grown accustomed to God's peace and blessing being upon us, as has been the case for many years.

But when a people reject God and His will and His ways, sooner or later, His blessings dissipate – or He removes them, however you like to think of it.

I tend to think about it like sitting next to a fire on a cold night. While you're near the fire, you stay warm, but the further you move away from the fire, the colder you certainly get.

God's presence in our nation has been the fire of peace and order and justice and truth that we have enjoyed as a nation for a long time. It's not been perfect here; I'm not saying that.

As a people, as nations, go, though, we've stuck pretty close to the fire for quite a while.

But we have also, for quite a while, been moving away. A little more every day, every year, every decade, we move away. And things like Wednesday (and not just Wednesday), things like the riots in our other cities that have gone on, things like the racial injustices, things like the caustic or careless language and diatribe that has been spewed from every political side. No one is immune. No one is innocent. Those things that have gone on, not just in the last four years, but certainly in the last four years: these are the results. These are just more of the ongoing consequences of our moving away from the fire of truth and good and right – the fire that is God.

And we're the ones who've moved, you see? Not God. God has not moved. The Fire is still there, right where He's always been. He stands, and He waits for us.

Just as He stood and waited for Israel time and time again in her history; just as He has stood and waited for every nation and every people and every person on earth. He stands and calls out. He invites to Himself, and then waits for us to respond.

We stand at a distance, defiant, with our arms crossed and our backs to Him. And He looks upon us with pity, not hatred, not vengefulness. Jesus came not to condemn, but to save. God wants us to know who He is. He wants relationship with us, so He looks on us with sadness and grief, and He cries out, "Look how you're killing yourselves! In your walking away from me, you're walking away from the very source of all that is good, all that is life-giving. You're choosing your own destruction."

And it grieves Him.

Yet still He stands, and He calls, and He waits for us to choose to either return to the fire and warm ourselves as a people, or to just keep walking away, and in doing so to freeze ourselves to death in the darkness. He'd prefer

that we return, but He'll never compromise His truth and integrity and His holiness. He leaves it up to us. By nature, it's our choice, because we reflect His nature.

In God's economy, there is no life, no peace, no warmth, and no future for the proud, the vile, the godless, the unrepentant.

Right now, our nation is surviving, I think, in large part on the buoyancy of the prayers of God's people — more than it knows and maybe more than we know.

So, as far as we can influence our nation toward good and right, we are called to engage — certainly we're called to do that.

But you know, the best thing that the Church and the best thing a follower of Jesus can do for the sake of the future of our nation is to set our own spiritual houses in order — to personally (because that's who we can control; we can't control what other people say and do and think), to personally go as deep with Jesus as we can possibly go.

The best thing you and I can do for the sake of our nation is to seek our own transformation of soul, to such a degree that it all spills over and presents in an undeniable way the reality and the character of God to our neighbors in a winsome way, an unassailable way, an inescapable way.

To see and experience truly Christ-like people, to see and experience a truly Christ-like church, is the spiritual medicine our nation needs. And it's the only thing that will cure what ails us as a people. Too much fake and not enough real.

Psalms 46 must have been written in a time of national crisis. Through the years, people have suggested several different possibilities of what that specific crisis could have been, but nobody knows for sure. Israel certainly experienced plenty of crises from which we could choose.

The lines written there speak of the instability of their world. They were experiencing the nations of the world rising and falling and wars and conflicts between its peoples. The writer here even speaks of the volatility of the physical world: the shaking of the ground, the collapse of the mountains, the turbulence of the waters.

We read these psalms as ancient words, and because we think of them as poetry and because they happened so long ago, we tend to just dispatch them and read right over them. We tend not to take them seriously or even think about what the writer may have been contemplating or enduring. And so, they tend to become irrelevant to us.

But what was happening in the psalmist's day was just as real to him as last Wednesday in Washington is real to you and me.

The writer here is truly feeling all that tension and uncertainty. He's not in some isolation chamber, and neither is he in denial about all that was going on in his world. The pain is real. The events are worrisome. The conflict is very present in his life.

And yet, the psalmist admits that all these earthly realities — all these events that are shaking his world and threatening to shake his soul — are *nothing* compared to the reality and the power of God.

Neither the unrest of the nations nor even the shaking of the earth itself is any match for the strength and stability of God in the psalmist's life. That's why God is, the writer says, "our refuge and strength and help and source of confidence and courage."

Even in the midst of turmoil — and actually *especially* in the midst of turmoil — God presents Himself as the one (and frankly the *only one*) *solid, stable, trustworthy* entity/person/institution in which we can trust.

He's our *refuge*, the psalmist says. When things are going nuts around us, we can find cover and peace in Him.

He's our *strength*. When all around us threaten to overwhelm us and even to crush us, we go to Him and He holds us up.

He's our *help*. He comes to our rescue when we're in trouble, and He doesn't do it just every now and then, either. The psalmist says He's an *ever-present* help. He's *always* there helping us, even when we're not aware of it — even when what He's doing at the moment may not look like help to us. Not what we think of as help, but He is an ever-present help.

He's our refuge and strength and ever-present help.

That's all really good, but now this is where it gets even better. The psalmist then declares that because God is our refuge and strength and help, verse 4 there, "*the city of God, the place where God is, the place where God dwells, can be and is glad.*" *Glad!*

Wherever God is, wherever He dwells, there is *not* just an *absence of fear*, as in maybe some *neutral* or *emotionless* sense, but instead, there is — there exists — the *presence of gladness*.

Really the word is *joy!* Even in the face of national upheaval, still there is joy! It flows through the city, the place where God is, like branches of a river. The image is probably supposed to bring up the image of the rivers that flowed through the Garden of Eden before sin took hold: that kind of God's presence, that kind of peace, that kind of gladness, that kind of joy.

Why is there joy there, even when all this stuff is going on nearby?

Because the fact is that wherever God is, it is secure in spite of the threats.

Wherever God is, that place is free of worry and anxiety because verse 7 there says, "*the Lord Almighty* (or some translations say, '*the Lord of Heaven's armies*') *is among us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.*"

That's why there's joy there.

When you're facing a bully, and you know that the guy standing behind you is big and huge and able to take that bully and squash him into the ground, there's going to be a smile on your face. God is our "BIG Brother," if you will. That's why there's joy.

Throughout Israel's history, one thing they struggled to understand was that the city of God was not simply a physical place. Again and again, they wanted to make God dwell in their city — the city they chose.

But the city of God is that place where God chooses to dwell.

In the Old Testament, the dwelling place of God was never fixed; it was never final. For a time, it was Jerusalem and the temple. For a time, it was the tabernacle in the desert. For a time, it was a shrine at Shiloh.

The place of God's dwelling, and so the place of that security and confidence was always both real but also relative.

Israel's problem was that they always wanted God to be where they wanted Him to be, in one specific place.

The prophet Isaiah lamented that Israel did not take this movability of God seriously.¹

Jeremiah also accused his contemporaries of misunderstanding this.²

That's why, when Jerusalem did fall to the Babylonians, it was so devastating to Israel. They thought God was in Jerusalem.

Yet, in the New Covenant, all this became a lot more clear, because the dwelling of God took the form of a person: Jesus Christ, God's Son.

And now, ever since Pentecost, ever since the coming of God's Spirit to into His Church, the dwelling of God is in His people—all who follow Jesus, all whom the Spirit lives within.

Christ-followers: we are the city of God.

We are the place where God dwells.

The church—not this building, not this nation—is the city on a hill, Jesus said, that cannot be hidden.³

And so, it is now within us that rivers of joy are to flow in spite of all that goes on around us in our world.

Rivers of joy are to flow in us because God dwells in His people.

He dwells here.

That's why Jesus said, "It really is better for you that I go away."

If you *know* Jesus...

I don't mean, "know *about* Jesus." Lots of people know *about* Jesus. Our nation would say they know about Jesus. Even demons know *about* Jesus.⁴

If you *know* Jesus:

- if you're in *living, ongoing* relationship with Him,
- if you're talking to Him and listening to Him,
- if you're following Jesus,

then God dwells in you, and all of His presence and strength and protection and security dwells within you too.

Such that:

- even in the midst of chaos and turmoil,
- in the midst of wars and conflicts,
- in the midst of disaster, both natural and man-made.

you can, God says right there in this Psalm, verse 10: "*Be still, and know that I am God; and that I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.*"

And this is what leads to the title of the message today: *A Time to Sing.*

King Solomon, whom we presume to be the writer of Ecclesiastes, says that there is a time for everything under heaven.

Some may question my suggestion that this is a time to sing, considering all that's gone on this week.

Yet I say to you this is precisely the time to sing.

It's not that we sing in celebration of all that's gone on; that would be heartless.

We sing, rather, because *in spite of all that's gone on*, we have gladness within us. We have joy, a river of it, flowing through us that provides a sure, settled peace: a river of joy that washes away anxiety and fear *because* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of all creation, the Lord of the armies of Heaven is, not just with us, but He is in us.

As we have chosen Him, He has chosen to make us His temple, His dwelling place.

And where God is, there is a peace, there is a gladness, there is a joy that brings forth song.

And our song reveals that gladness, that joy, to our worried world. And it shows them where peace and calm and truth and confidence and security can *really* be found:

not in the halls of *government*,

not in the chaos of *war*,

not in the armies of the *world*,

not in any *political* or *economic system*.

But instead, these are found in the God of all Gods and the King of all Kings, who makes His dwelling within anyone who will follow Him and honor Him, and who will pledge their allegiance to Jesus Christ, His Son.

I mean, that's why the psalmist wrote, after all. A psalm is a song, written so a people who were suffering chaos and conflict, might have a song of truth to sing and to speak of the reality of God, both to themselves and to the world around them.

What's happening in our nation offers us the perfect time to seriously consider: in what do we *really* take our confidence and security?

In our *nation*? In our *government*? In the *buildings* of our *capitol*? In our *military*? In our *freedoms*? In our *rights*?

In *ourselves*?

All those may very well crumble around us, as they did in the Psalmist's day. We don't wish them to, but neither did he. No one, no people, ever has.

And yet they do crumble around us. All those things shake and sway and crash down in our fallen world.

Which is precisely why God invites us to Himself—to receive Him and to follow Him and to so make Him in our lives what He really already is: our *refuge* and *strength* and *ever-present help*.

This is the perfect time to say yes to Him.

The perfect time to experience and express the gladness and joy that His presence makes possible.

And—contrary to what some may think, this is the perfect time to sing.

¹ Isaiah 28-29

² Jeremiah 7

³ Matthew 5:14

⁴ Luke 4:34

And there is only, really, one song to sing – written by Martin Luther, while he, himself, was in the middle of a huge conflict, both personal and beyond.

He fought depression, as he watched the world around Him and as the movement he'd begun struggled and endured all manner of resistance.

And while he was trying to find a way out of his funk, he found in notes he'd written years before, the words, "the devil hates music, because he cannot endure cheerfulness. Satan can smirk but he cannot laugh; he can sneer but he cannot sing."

So, in 1529, at what may have been his lowest and most depressed point, Luther began reading Psalm 46, repeating those first words over and over, "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*"

And with those words in his heart, he hurled his musical defiance at his enemy by writing the account of his struggle – singing it in the face of his enemy.

Fredrick Hodge translated Luther's words in 1853, to provide the English-speaking world the ability to also sing, in the face of the devil and the chaos he provokes, the psalm that declares:

God as the *fortress* of the soul,

Jesus as the *champion* of the soul,
and *Satan* as it's *enemy*,
all the while promising the ultimate victory to God,
whose Kingdom is forever.

This song reminded Luther himself, and has reminded believers ever since, that even in, and maybe *especially* in, the midst of earthly chaos, when God dwells with you, it is always the right time to sing.

The song, of course, is on page 26 in our hymnals – *A Mighty Fortress*, or *Ein Feste Burg* in German.

We sing, in the spirit of Luther, a song of joy, in defiance of all who would work against God and what is right and good.

We sing against all the chaos the enemy brings, in order to give witness of, and glory to, our Refuge and Strength and ever-present Help in time of trouble.

Song: *A Mighty Fortress*

Benediction: May the Lord give and keep a song of joy in your heart, such that even in days of chaos and trouble – even if earthly kingdoms fail, His Kingdom – God's Kingdom – is forever.