

God our Secure Refuge
Psalm 46
BPC 25/10/2020

Almost 500 years ago, in 1527, the great reformer Martin Luther had a year we can relate to. The Black Plague was again spreading across most of Europe and especially Germany where Luther was in Wittenberg. It was highly contagious with what was described as an “astronomical mortality rate.”

When it swept through Europe almost 200 years earlier it is estimated that it wiped out almost 60% of its population. To make matters worse, Luther not only had the plague to deal with, during this same time his son almost died, and Luther himself was struck with illness (of the non-plague kind).

That’s some year right... Although the date is 1527 it sounds fairly 2020 does it not? Many are calling this the year to forget... Global pandemic has taken over with lockdowns, facemasks, and economic recession. And if these memes are anything to go by, people are struggling with how to respond...

Beyond Blue reports a massive increase of calls with huge backlog with major concerns over mental health, a rise in domestic violence and divorce rates spiking. We’ve seen hoarding and fighting caused by widespread panic and just general frustration as we struggle to live under restrictions.

So how did Luther respond to plague, sickness, and family tragedy? He did what he loved to do: turn to Psalm 46. Luther is well known for his love of this Psalm and it was in this context that Luther penned what would be called the Battle Hymn of the Reformation, ‘A Mighty Fortress is Our God’.

The hymn is based on Psalm 46 and was both a comfort and inspiration for Luther in 1527 Wittenberg it is a great Psalm for us. As we just heard Annie read it, it was written in a time of crisis as the world dissolves yet starts and finishes with confidence of God. And as the title says, this is a song, a Psalm of the Sons of Korah, to be sung regularly by God’s people as they face crisis or chaos.

Because what response does God expect from us in a pandemic? What is to be our uniquely Christian reaction? This Psalm shows us that moments or even years of chaos and trouble are not times to forget by grow! To learn to have confidence rather than fear! The psalm is designed to inspire our confidence as it directs our hope beyond what this world can offer, but also comes with an important rebuke, as God knows that we are often tempted to search elsewhere for God alone can give us.

So the Psalm begins with a declaration of confidence in God in the face of chaos as the Psalmist lays down reality of who God is. Notice how matter of fact the Psalmist is, v.1, *God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.*

True security is found in God and in God alone. Refuge speaks of external security and safety while strength is about inner transformation. So as we run and cling to God our refuge the point is not

that we escape trouble but are emboldened to be faithful in it for God is an *ever-present help in trouble*.

The Psalmist is urging us to see God as our reliable, constant, and sufficient source of help – willing and ready if we only turn to him. Because this is who God is no matter what is going on around us. The Psalm makes this clear through the catastrophic language of vv.2-3

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

Now the language is exaggerated with a picture the world itself literally falling apart. The earth and mountains are pictures of stability. And although perceived as immovable they seen giving way and falling into the sea.

Now the language is deliberately extravagant to highlight that God is our refuge even if the whole world collapsed. But its some 3000 years since the Psalm was written and what was unimaginable then is almost common now.

We have any number of natural disasters that fit the description of v.3. We have bombs that can level a city and flatten a landscape and to a modern reader v.2 might even sound like a description of global warming. Our society does have a concerned obsession with world-ending cataclysmic events.

Movie after movie that speculate about global disasters or fallout from nuclear warfare... And so often this speculation and additional knowledge leads to anxiety, fear, and panic.

In David Attenborough's latest documentary on climate change he declares our world is headed for disaster and our children are doomed unless we act now. I think it's why the emotionally charged speeches of teen Greta Thunberg struck such a nerve and received widespread support.

And yet with a clear picture of who God is the Psalmist boldly declares in v.2, *Therefore we will not be afraid*. Regardless of how bad our world seems to be or where we might be heading, God's people need not and should not fear but turn to God our ever-present help!

We see something similar in Jesus calming the storm in Mark 4. He's in the boat with his disciples, a mighty storm threatens the boat and their very lives and in their panic they wake Jesus and accuse him of not caring about them – to which Jesus rebukes them asks them why they are afraid.

As we see our God clearly and cling to him we can have confidence in the chaos. So how do we get there? It all sounds a little simplistic and perhaps unrealistic doesn't it to simply say we will not fear. But the point is not that true Christians are somehow incapable of fear, but that even in the face of the most overwhelming terror, we gain strength and courage to allay our fears as we turn to and trust our sovereign God.

Not that all might seem a bit basic right – but I think global pandemic and lockdown has shown that trusting God and being strengthened by him is not our default reaction. How quickly do forget God, either turning to despair or simply looking to ourselves of what we will do to fix our situation.

It's what we are wired to do right? What do all these movies that speculate about the world falling apart in one way or another have in common? Usually it's humanity banding together to fix the problem, save the day, and carve out a brighter future.

God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble is so often, even for Christians, an afterthought or last resort. So let Psalm 46 bring you back to reality of the reliable, sufficient, and generously willing God who invites us trust him and calm our fears.

And as we share in that confidence we too should be willing to confess out loud as the Psalmist does multiple times in v.1, 7, and 11 that God and God alone is our fortress, and hope, and strength. I don't know about you but I've recently found myself caught up in watching daily the case numbers.

And these numbers are often the topic of conversation as we long for restrictions easing and wait for the Sunday press conference. But what I've found as I get so consumed by conversations about cases and restrictions easing is that it seems my hope and confidence is the same as everyone else's.

That even as someone who professes Jesus is Lord I'm really just suggesting that what I'm clinging to and hoping for is some more earthly freedoms to enjoy life now. And what will be so good for us and our witness to a world that rejects Jesus and in reality has no hope, is to both embrace and joyfully declare to all that true security is found in Jesus alone: He is our refuge and strength.

Is that what you've modelled and declared to others? It's strange isn't it that even though I work for a church and everyone I know knows I'm a Christian, I still hold back sounding too religious or making things awkward by speaking of God. I think it's a tension lots of us often feel.

But the Psalm shows us that when God is our refuge and strength it is worth declaring for our own good and for the good of others. Because our confidence in God regardless of the chaos we are in, is not based on fantasy or wishful thinking, but the initiative and presence of God.

In vv.4-7 the Psalmist directs us to the cause of his confidence with a beautiful contrast. We move from a raging sea to a calm joy-giving river. 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.*

The contrast really is quite beautiful. Although the mountains themselves are falling in v.2, there is a city that will not fall, the city of God. And so what is the basis for our incomparable confidence? Well it is by knowing what city you belong to. While every city on earth can fall and be destroyed, the city of God will never be for it cannot be – and being part of this city is true security.

A city that had a river or a solid water supply was harder to take because it sustained the people even if they were surrounded and locked in. Cut off the water supply and it was a different story, the people would perish before the invaders even got in.

But this river flows from the very presence of God. The city of God or what is often called Zion in the Psalms, is Jerusalem, because at the heart of the city was the temple where God himself dwelled. And the river is a picture of spiritual sustenance that comes from living with God and receiving his blessing and restoration.

It is his presence and goodness that makes the city glad. Because God himself lives in this city it is sustained and safe even under attack. v.6 *Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.*

Jerusalem was attacked many times and it might even be that invasion by a nation like Assyria is the context for the Psalm. And notice how we have moved from confidence in the face of natural disasters and world ending events in vv.1-3 to gladness in the face of war or political turmoil in v.6.

When you live with God, belong to his people, there is nothing in this world that outside of his control or too hard for him to deal with. He needs only to speak and the earth melts. And this is something God's people knew all too well from their own history.

That phrase *at break of day* in v.5 points us back to the Exodus when God saved his people from Pharaoh's army. Having lead them safely through the Red Sea, God said to Moses in Exodus 14, *"Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen."* ²⁷ *Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea.* God had shown his power and sovereignty over all people, even those waging war against him and his people already. They knew this. And as we look back at God's actions in history we are assured of his help in the present. That God will help at the break of day also tells us that every morning the sun rises is a reminder of his readiness and willingness to be our refuge and strength.

Lamentations 3 says, ²² *Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.* ²³ *They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.* Or Zephaniah 3:5, *Morning by morning he dispenses justice and every new day he does not fail.*

And so notice that this Psalm is not suggesting that we "let go and let God" or merely hope that a higher power is at work. He is drawing them and us to the all-powerful covenant God who has taken the initiative to reveal himself, to dwell with and save his people.

Verse 7 makes that clear: *The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.* For the first time in the Psalm, God is referred to as The LORD, YHWH, the God who revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush and saved his people. And he is YHWH Almighty, or the LORD of Hosts.

It is a picture of God as a warrior with a mighty army who will have certain victory – the all powerful God is with us. But we not just told of his power but also his grace for he is also *the God of Jacob*. You may or may not know the story of Jacob and his family that occupies the second half of Genesis.

It is a messy story to say the least of crisis, drama and family betrayal. Of jealousy, deception and fraud, rebellion and heartache. Yet God, the LORD Almighty chose this family, to dwell with them and bless them and to bless others through them. This is God who chooses, sticks with, and uses the unimpressive! Despite the mess, despite the chaos, he is with them and at work through/for them.

And so this refrain in v.7 that is repeated in v.11 draws us not simply to God's power but also his character – he is the sovereign God of grace and mercy.

But it is important to remember that Jerusalem was attacked many times, and even destroyed by the Babylonians. And so being safe and belonging to the city of God is a picture of being in right relationship with God, of dwelling in his presence and being safe forever.

It's a picture of heaven as we see in Revelation 22, a heavenly city with a river flowing from the throne of God where God lives with his people and they enjoy peace and safety forever.

And this is so important for us to grasp, because as those saved by Jesus and given eternal life, this city of God and eternal safety is something we enjoy and experience now.

Speaking to and about Christians the author to the Hebrews says, 12:²² *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,* ²³ *to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.*

Because like Israel, we too have seen and experienced the presence, power and grace of God in the Gospel of Jesus. As Matthew tells us at the birth of Jesus, he is Immanuel, God with us (1:23) and he is our refuge, for in his death and resurrection we are given a sure hope of forgiveness and life with God that lasts forever.

It is on the cross we see God's power and grace combine as those who hate and kill Jesus only serve his purposes as his death is our salvation as he then rises to conquer death for us.

And the risen King with all authority promises us that he will be with us always, by his Spirit (Mt 28:20). We are never alone, assured of his presence and help daily. And so to use the language of Philippians 3 it is as we know we are citizens of heaven (3:20) and belong to Jesus eternally we share in the confidence of the Psalm.

And so while the safety and comforts of any earthly city can be lost, taken, or destroyed, as we somewhat experiencing now, the benefits of belonging to that heavenly city can never can. We belong to it now, we will be there forever in the presence of our great God, and our earthly circumstances should only serve to strengthen our hope and joy of going there.

But most of know this kind of perspective and confidence still doesn't come easily to us...

Our experience confirms what the Psalm presumes, that even as those who hope in Jesus, turmoil, chaos, and hardship will follow. And for most of us who have been Christian for more than a minute know our confidence wavers, our faithfulness is fickle, and cowardice often outweighs our courage.

So how do we consistently have the confidence and gladness the Psalm declares is on offer for God's people? How can we joyfully and repeatedly embrace and confess God is our refuge and strength?

Well vv.8-11 actually tell us how as the Psalm finishes with a call to a respond. The call to come in v.8, as it is in Psalm 95 is a call to worship, to share in the Psalmist's confidence and lack of fear.

But the way to worship might actually surprise us: v.8, 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.*

Verse 9 is promising that God will bring peace to his people as wars cease on the whole earth, but this peace is won through judgement – the *desolations he has brought on the earth*.

Like v.5 this is pointing back to the Exodus where peace came through judgement as God saved his people and destroyed Pharaoh's army. And it is by seeing what God has done in the past that gives confidence for the present and the future.

What God did to Egypt anticipates the final judgement when God puts an end to all hostility and war. And the same is true for us, as we look back to the cross: we see peace through judgement as Jesus takes the wrath God in our place. And at peace with God we are assured of his presence and protection now in the face of chaos, persecution, or suffering, but also we know that the risen Jesus will return in glory and judgement when as he makes all things new.

We are to see the world through the lenses of salvation history – what God has done in the past and promised for the future – and it is as we do that we cling to our saviour in the present.

Calvin puts it beautifully in his commentary on this Psalm when he says the reason we do not rest in the security we have in Christ is because “we are indifferent to the consideration of his works, or so ungrateful, that we make not half the account of them which we ought to do.”

And the Psalm is calling us to develop regular and deep contemplative habits, to be proficient in setting before our hearts and mind every day Christ crucified. As Paul says to Timothy, *Remember Christ Jesus, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.* (2Tim 2:8)

So although it might seem a bit rudimentary I think the Psalm is saying the pathway to confidence in the face of chaos is regular habits listening to God and talking to him – because it is as we have a big view of God and see Him rightly that all our troubles and trials are small and weak in comparison. As covid19 has forced us to slow down and stop many things, it has been wasted if we haven't done this.

To remember the mighty acts of God plants deep in our memory the evidence of his care, protection, and providential rule. And if the knowledge of glory of God is displayed in the face of Christ, we must daily come and see what God has done and is doing and will do which takes us to verse 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.”

There are probably few verses that have made it on to posters and mugs more than this one. It is frequently quoted and much loved. But I think this Psalm has taken on the idea of almost meditation that could not be further from what God is actually calling for here.

To be still and acknowledge God is a rebuke – God is not calling for quiet but change – to stop or cease an action. And that is made clear by the promise and warning that God will be exalted among the nations and in the earth. The point is: resisting God is futile.

And so v.10 is quite multifaceted. On the one hand it is saying to the nations and all those who rage against God and his people that their efforts are pointless. For all who oppose God this is call to acknowledge reality and submit to the true and living God.

And if you are listening tonight and not yet following Jesus, this is a call for you. By his resurrection, Jesus has been vindicated as the King of Kings to whom all people must bow. Philippians 2:9, ⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,* ¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹ *and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

The risen and reigning King Jesus is graciously calling all people, including you and I, to himself, to repent, acknowledge our sin and rebellion, and enjoy his salvation and find life. Every knee should bow and in reality every knee will bow when Jesus returns but it will be too late.

But v.10 also comes as a rebuke and warning for God's people. Having called us to find our security and confidence through worship as we grasp our salvation, the Psalmist knows we have a tendency to look elsewhere for our refuge and strength. Throughout the OT we see God's people willingly turn almost everywhere other than God for help when faced with trouble.

Whether turning to false gods or idols, alliances with foreign nations, or just trusting in their own ability to fix the situation themselves... So sadly, while confessing God as our true security doesn't come naturally, finding alternative, albeit feeble and unsatisfying, sources of security does.

The human heart is an idol factory, capable of turning almost anything into a false source of hope and trust. Israel especially show us this. Managing to take good gifts from God like peace and prosperity or even the temple itself and turn them into false sources of security in place of God himself.

And so I wonder then if v.10 is a good word for us during this pandemic. Has Jesus been your refuge and strength *in* the pandemic? Is your longing that you will be faithful and not fear, or that Jesus will simply remove the virus? Has good health and low cases been your comfort, or the God of grace?

I imagine for lots of us, this pandemic has been a revealing experience. And Psalm 46 shows us that at the heart of knowing God is not demanding things from him but running to him. Knowing Jesus does not spare us from pandemic or sickness but give us eternal security and hope through it!

So where has your hope been over past 6 or more months of lockdown? To what or who have you turned for confidence and hope? *Be still and know that I am God, I will be exalted in the earth* just might be the words lots of need to hear right now, and the response God is calling you to.

In 1527 as many in Wittenberg were dying from the plague and the prince had ordered him to flee, Luther refused. He stayed to care for the sick and dying, and to preach the gospel, and administer the sacraments and even converted his own monastery into a makeshift hospital.

Luther shows us that confidence in God and to not fear is not some passive bunkering down and waiting for things to blow over. It is to be faithful to God, evening showing the love of God to others in the midst of turmoil and even death. So how do we share in that confidence?

How do we join the Psalmist and say though the lockdown continues and virus spreads, though many are hoarding and hurting, sick and even dying, I will not fear?

Well both before and after the plague, Luther was known for saying to his friends or colleagues, “come, let us sing the forty-sixth psalm.” Luther would constantly come back to God’s Word, and especially this Psalm, to both gain and confess with others our unshakeable confidence in God.

So let this Psalm, by God’s Spirit, preach confidence to your heart, that the Lord Almighty is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress. Let it point you again to the cross where we see God reign in the midst chaos for our salvation. And knowing that not one aspect of your life is out of his control, let it cause you to run and cling to the risen and reigning King Jesus daily,.

Let’s pray.