



**“God Is Our Stronghold in Times of Trouble”**

**Scripture – Psalm 46**

**Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, March 9, 2025**

For better or for worse, you have tuned in to week three of my miniseries on the Book of Psalms. Out of the 150 psalms, I have selected seven to give us a glimpse of the variety of what we discover among these ancient poems, prayers, and hymns. We have employed Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann’s three category system to enrich our understanding of the variety that exists. Do you remember the categories? Orientation – Disorientation – New Orientation.

By his own admission, all of the psalms do not fit precisely into those three categories. However, his scheme reminds us that different psalms speak to different seasons of our lives. A psalm that does not say much to us today, may resonate deep in our soul a year from now.

Two weeks ago, we studied Psalm 104, a supreme example of a psalm of Orientation. It heaps praise on God as Creator of the world and expresses the joy of one whose life is rich. The speaker experiences God and God’s creation as reliable. It comes from the lips of one who is most likely trekking a stretch of life when all is positive and peaceful.

Last week, I fear I may have given you whiplash because we swiveled 180 degrees from shouts of jubilation to cries of lament. We focused on Psalm 88, a pleading prayer by one whose life is hell and wonders if God even cares. Psalm 88 is a prime example of a psalm of Disorientation. The one who prays is in a place of dreadful darkness and does not hesitate to voice gut-wrenching complaints to God. This psalm gives us permission to question, to let loose on how we are honestly feeling, and to belt out our grievances.

Today we take up one of the best known and well-loved psalms. For more than 2,000 years, people of faith have leaned on Psalm 46 and its compelling and comforting words: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” It serves as a sound example of a psalm of New Orientation because the one who places trust in God does so, not from the position of a safe, secure, and stable life, but rather as one who is realistic about the chaos and struggles of the world. These troubles are beyond what the psalmist can handle alone, so he turns to a power *beyond* himself and *greater than* himself for strength. He turns to the Creator of heaven and earth.

Did you notice that in the first verse, the psalmist uses three different words to describe God? God is our refuge; God is our strength; and God is our help. The Hebrew word translated “refuge” can also be translated “fortress.” Thus, it comes as no surprise to learn that Psalm 46 was the inspiration for Protestant Reformer Martin Luther’s majestic hymn: *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. Named by some as the battle hymn of the Protestant Reformation, Luther believed in the powerful influence of sacred music. His 16<sup>th</sup> century hymn based on this psalm, spawned faith and courage at a time when many believed the world was coming apart. What had once seemed firmly bolted down was coming unhinged. Which, in my mind, makes it an extremely relevant psalm for us today.

We live in frightening and uncertain times. Brutal wars in Gaza and Ukraine could spill beyond their borders. In our own nation, gun violence and drug addiction shatter families and fracture communities. Hateful speech is given a green light; homophobia, transphobia, and Islamophobia are making a bitter comeback. Racism keeps raising its ugly head. Poverty crushes millions. Climate change and extreme weather threaten the future of our planet. Greed and power plays seem to be the winning tickets.

Where do you turn for steadiness and support? The psalmist urges us to pivot to God. God is our fortress, our strength, and our help especially when times are troublesome and demanding.

Now, there are some psalms that are so intent on emphasizing God’s complete control over the events of the world, that they chalk up terrible events as divine punishment. Some disaster has befallen the people, and the psalmist states it is because the people sinned, and God is administering a just punishment for their waywardness. Not so Psalm 46. It declares what everyone knows. Sometimes we sow the seeds that cause our calamities, but not always. Sometimes people and events beyond us cause our misery and sometimes life is simply cruel.

In verses two and three, the psalmist writes: “The mountains shake in the heart of the sea...the waters roar and foam.” That description could be a literal reference to natural disasters including earthquakes and violent storms at sea. It is a fact that there are earthquakes in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea occasionally experiences cyclones. However, the psalmist is using poetic license. The shaking mountains and roaring sea are metaphors for horrific seasons of life. The psalmist is not concerned with cause and effect or placing blame or attempting to provide a rationale for troubles. His concern is what we do with our fears when life turns mean.

It is vital to note that the psalm does not state that there is no need to fear. Neither does it declare that God will take care of everything so throw your worries to the wind. It says that when our world disintegrates, we can find in God the strength to endure.

In December of 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus and was arrested. That event became the match that ignited the Montgomery Bus Boycott. A new pastor in town, just 26 years old, became the spokesperson for the boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr. projected confidence. However, after someone called and threatened his life and the lives of his wife and children, he was filled with fear.

He came home late one night from a strategy session. Coretta was asleep; but he was restless. He walked into his kitchen and fixed a cup of coffee. Written down later in his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, he describes what happened to him that night. He said, “I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a

coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I took my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.”

“The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. (God,) ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’”

“At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: ‘Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.”

Psalms 46 is not a call to disregard danger. It is a call to courage. When life is harsh and fears dominate our thoughts we need assurance that God can infuse us with an intrepid spirit to battle the demons that assail us. We need God to help us muster a firm resolve not to give up or to give in.

That does not mean we must constantly expose ourselves to the endless news cycles that stir our anger and stimulate anxiety. Please take media breaks. Since the news excels in creating negative emotions, we need to counter the news with prayers of thanksgiving for what is right and true and good in life. We need to counter the news by devoting time to nurturing loving relationships. We need to counter the news with passages of Scripture like Psalm 46 that remind us of something we often forget – we are not alone! The final verse of our psalm reads: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

One of the values of spending time with Scripture is that it reminds us that it will likely take time for our efforts to bear fruit. We wish everything would be resolved in our lifetime. We want racism to end, environmental catastrophe to cease, cancer cured, homeless people housed, gun violence ended, and each person accepted for who they are.

I think it helps to remember that Martin Luther King Jr. fought every day of his life to overturn the injustice that racism perpetuated. He took seriously the challenge of Jesus to become a peacemaker. He gave himself tirelessly to stopping the Vietnam War. He suffered physical and emotional abuse for faithfully following the way of Jesus and the prophets. He was imprisoned, and then he was cut down by an assassin’s bullet when he was only in his 30s. However, he understood that the arc of history is long – too long for most of us – but because of God it bends toward justice.

Have you visited Sagrada Familia in Barcelona or St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City? Each of these monumental structures took more than 100 years to build. Sagrada Familia isn’t finished yet and it has been under construction for more than 140 years. It took six centuries to build Milan Cathedral.

We are like the stonemasons who worked day after day, creating a grand Cathedral yet knowing that it would not be completed in their lifetime. They would never see the final magnificent edifice of their efforts.

We hope to catch a glimpse of some of the accomplishments of our efforts. But if not, we pray to acquire a heart of faith that God will use our work to bring about something grand. In the meantime, we will conquer our fears with the certain knowledge that God is our help, our strength, our fortress.

## Prayers of the People ~ Randall T. Clayton

O God, in the midst of the busyness of our daily lives and the noise of the world around us, we pause to offer you praise, to share with you our deepest desires, and to ask for your help both for us and for a world that knows so very much hurt. Waters surge, winds howl, and homes are demolished; fires rage turning both lives and belongings to ash; weapons discharge and lives are destroyed while communities are decimated; plastics proliferate, fossil fuels burn and the environment is degraded negatively impacting life across the globe; food sits in warehouses, while people starve; illness strikes, and medications or medical professionals are unable to reach those who need them...And so this day we come to you praying that your love will be powerfully felt in the hurting places and among the hurting peoples of this earth.

We pray for peace this day, and not merely any peace, not an uneasy peace, or an unfair peace, or a fragile peace, but we fervently pray for a just peace, a just peace where all can live in safety, where all can find their needs met, and where individuals and communities can flourish.

Among us and around us are hearts that have been broken by death of someone they loved, and hopes that have been destroyed by loss, dreams that have been taken away by circumstances beyond their control. We pray for the peace and comfort that only you can give. Wherever the pathway toward tomorrow is unknown, provide guidance. Wherever people fear what tomorrow may bring, offer the assurance of your presence.

For the hungry on this side of the globe and the other, for the sick near and far away, for those held as physical hostages and those who are hostage to yesterday and are unable to embrace needed changes to move faithfully into this new day, we pray. Bring freedom and life. We ask for your protection and care for those who have immigrated to this nation, knowing that regardless of their legal status, they are your beloved children every bit as much as we who pray to you today in this safe space. For those who fear the loss of long-sought rights, and those who bear the brunt of racist actions and attitudes, and those who are maligned for living into the people you created them to be, we pray. Bring hope and show us who pray this day how we can become advocates and how we might stand in solidarity with those the world seeks to push out or push down.

In times that often seem frightening, uncertain, and constantly changing, we ask that elected and appointed officials at all levels of government might have wisdom and empathy and that they might find a new vision for how to make sure the least among us have opportunity and life. Undergird with your courage and safety those who work so tirelessly in public and private spheres to build a world where life abounds for all.

Help us, O God, to know when it is we need to be still, and when we need to move; when we need to stop, and when we need to plow ahead so that we are the most faithful disciples we can possibly be.

Remembering your love, we also remember the prayer which Jesus taught:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**