

October 29, 2023
Reformation Sunday
Psalm 46
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

For Such a Time as This

“God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1)

We really need to hear those words. Because we know, we can tell that there is trouble abroad, trouble in our world, trouble in our country.

“Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,
and though the mountains shake in the depths of the sea;
though its waters rage and foam,
and though the mountains tremble with its tumult.” (Psalm 46:2-3)

It seems like a long time ago, but really, it's just been a long time since it was in the news, that so much of Canada was burning, that a dam in Libya was bursting, washing half of a town away, that earthquakes were shattering towns, cities, and villages in Turkey, Syria, Morocco. It didn't even make the news much, but it was just this past Wednesday when a category 5 hurricane slammed into Acapulco, Mexico, causing an unknown amount of damage, because even days later communications in that area are still unreliable.

Therefore, we will not fear? Not because it's not scary, but because “God is our refuge and strength. A very present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1)

So, we can work, and give and help and pray, but fear cannot overwhelm us. “The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our stronghold.” (Psalm 46:7)

The past couple of years we have seen wars break out in places that we have always known were unstable, unsettled, but that lived in a fragile, we can't call it peace, but we can call it statis. And then war in Ukraine, chaos in Haiti, war in Sudan, war between Israel and Hamas, that many fear that could erupt into a larger regional conflict, with neither side able to mourn their dead properly as the fighting escalates.

“The nations rage, and the kingdoms shake” (Psalm 46:6a)

The Psalm promises us that God is the one who makes war to cease in all the world, who breaks the bow and shatters the spear and burns the shields with fire, and yet, we cry out, “How long,” for perhaps we missed a devastating hurricane in Mexico because of the storm of violence in our own country, as a lone and disturbed gunman killed 18 people and wounded 13 more and sent communities into lockdown for days, caused unmeasurable trauma to uncountable, unknowable numbers of people.

And into our grief and our horror and fear, the Psalm speaks,

“Be still, then, and know that I am God;

I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth.”

The Lord of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” (Psalm 46:10).

Can words alone still the terror in our hearts, fear for our children and our children's children who seem to live in a world gone mad?

Did some religious poet of our day pen those words, those words that seem so meaningful, so timely, so important for us to hear living in the midst of all of the things that the Psalm describes, framed by the comforting words, words to give hope and strength and confidence to a frightened and flailing people, beginning with:

“God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1)

and ending with

“The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” (Psalm 46:11)

Of course, we know that these words weren't written by someone from our day, from our time. These words come to us across millennia.

Assigning a specific date to each Psalm in the Old Testament is an almost impossible task for biblical scholars, but this Psalm likely comes from the first Temple period in Jewish history, sometime between 900-600 BC. I realize that that's a big time gap, 300 years of history, but that's kind of the point. The Psalms are hymns, prayers, intended for Temple worship and personal devotion. Sometime during that period, some Temple singers wrote this Psalm, this hymn for them to sing to give hope and comfort to the

congregation that gathered for worship. Because it was what they believed and what their congregation needed to hear.

We can't know specifically what was going on in the life of the community, in the nation of Judah when this Psalm was written, but what we can know is that this was what they needed to hear. It was what they needed to be reminded of, that God was with them, that they were not alone, that no matter what happened in the world around them, even what happened in their own lives, the Lord of hosts was with them, the God of Jacob was their stronghold.

These weren't idle words written to people who couldn't imagine anything ever going wrong in their world, in their nation, in their lives. These were words to cling to written by and for people who knew unsteady government, unjust and unfaithful kings, who knew natural disasters, who knew civil unrest, who knew threats from within and from without, who saw empires rise and threaten around them.

And yet, the song on their lips was, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1) The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold." (Psalm 46:11)

We don't know exactly how many years later, but at least a thousand, Martin Luther took up his quill, with this Psalm in mind and wrote these words, "A mighty fortress is our God"—in other words, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." (Psalm 46:1)

With Psalm 46 in one hand and the experiences of his own life and his own time in his mind and his heart he penned a hymn that still speaks today, words inspired by a Psalm that still speaks today.

Because like the Psalmist before him and like us long after him, Martin Luther lived in a time when wars threatened or were the reality, when politics and political leaders, kings, emperors, popes, felt unstable and leaders unreliable, and when social structures, including the church, were experiencing upheaval. A new century had dawned and the old century's established ways of doing things were in disarray.

Of course, Luther himself was a large part of why that upheaval existed in church and society, but in some ways, it was inevitable. The winds of change were blowing and, in many ways, he was as much victim of those world altering changes as he was their catalyst. His words, written and spoken and preached had unleashed changes and a backlash that he probably could never have imagined when he stood before the church door in Wittenberg with 95 ideas for debate or when he mailed those same ideas to Rome inviting them into conversation about indulgences, their biggest money makers of the day.

So, what could he hang onto when, with his own words, he was turning the world upside down?

“The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our stronghold.”
(Psalm 46:11)

The people of God have never, ever lived in a time when they could walk by sight and not by faith. There has never been a time when the world was at peace, when people lived in unity and joy together, when we saw the unmitigated gladness of the city, untainted, unblemished by human suffering.

Our times, as deeply concerning as they are, as we see social structures rattle, as we hear cries for justice too often unheeded, as we plead for peace in a culture that seems to celebrate violence, as we watch the world change

too quickly and too slowly all at once, are not so different than the world of the Psalmist, who lived 2000 years ago, of the world of Martin Luther who lived 500 years ago.

Even in our own homes and our own families we see the brokenness of the world shatter what should be whole and holy, loss where there should be love, and strife where there should be unity and peace.

Perhaps it shouldn't comfort me, but it does, that the people of the past, who lived in faith, who believed with the whole hearts that God was with them, did not live in some kind of utopian peace, but in a world as messed up, confusing, frightening, and challenging as the one that we live in. Because in the midst of it, they worshiped God, they sang songs and raised families and passed on faith and found gladness in the city and streams of living water.

And they gave us words for such a time as this:

“God is our refuge and strength,

a very present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1)

“The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” (Psalm 46:11)