

“OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH”

When I was studying preaching in seminary, my professor told the class that there would be times in our careers when we would preach the sermons we need to hear. That does not mean that I have the right to lay all of my struggles on you today, but it does mean that I think like all humans, preachers talk to themselves a lot. I also think that the best sermons have a touch of authenticity. I hope I do not preach AT people but rather communicate with those who are listening. I have certainly gone through some wild and crazy times recently. Things in my personal life have been up and down, and I have allowed the affairs of our country and the world affect me greatly. While I realize that as a practical matter I have very little control over many things, I still do my best to exercise my influence. In the process I often run myself ragged and get exhausted. That is why today I need to hear that God is my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

We all face times in our lives that are so hard and so painful that we ask ourselves if we can actually survive them. Maybe that is the case for you today. Maybe there are things going on in your family that seem as if they are forever broken. I know what that is like. Then there are health concerns that arise from time to time. They can seem difficult and even hopeless. Financial setbacks are another area that can cause despair. When the bills are piling up or unemployment is a problem, it is difficult to stay hopeful. Then there is for all of us the reality of

living in turbulent times. We just came through a national election that emphasized how divided we are as a nation. It can be enough to drive us into a cave and roll a large boulder behind us. We may just want to hide. But we do not have that luxury. As a practical matter, we all must get up every morning and face our lives and the problems they contain. So can scripture make our burdens easier? Can we lean on it as a source of comfort and trust? I think Psalm 46 has much to teach us in these times.

Our words of centering this morning come from William James, who is widely considered the father of modern psychotherapy. They are words of great wisdom. We all have the ability to choose our thoughts. My favorite philosophical writer is Viktor Frankl, who wrote the book Man's Search for Meaning. Frankl was a prisoner in several Nazi concentration camps during WWII. She was a psychiatrist and as a student of human behavior, occupied himself in studying the attitudes and behaviors of the other prisoners. He ultimately concluded that humans have a great deal of influence on their destinies. His most famous quote, which is the thesis of the entire book, is that the last human freedom is the freedom to choose our attitude in any given set of circumstances. So that means that, even in extremely challenging circumstances, we all have within us the ability to determine our viewpoint on life. I truly believe this – I REALLY DO.

Today's scripture backs up this whole idea. Psalm 46 was written at a time of extreme adversity from which God had provided deliverance. It tells us that when trouble strikes, God is sufficient to get us through. In some ways, Psalm 46 is written like an end times scripture. Its language sounds a great deal like the language used by the prophets. It has a victorious tone. Four times in this short Psalm we are reminded that God is with us in the worst of times. I believe that God wants to prepare us for the storms of life, reminding us that he is in the midst of the storm. Sometimes we need more than just a reminder of this truth. We need it to sink deep inside us so that we will be able to stand during uncertain and fearful times. The psalm describes an extraordinary and frightening time of trouble, times which would cause any of us to be afraid. Fear is a completely normal emotion. But when we face such difficult times, how can we deal with such chaotic events? It is essential that we remember that those events are always in God's control, and God uses them for God's purposes.

Another answer to fear is having confidence in the God who is present. The psalm tells us that God is a very present help in trouble. The Hebrew word for present can mean to be found, to be recognized, found sufficient or to be enough. God proves Himself to be sufficient. Verse 5 tells us that God is in the midst. God loves to be in the middle of things. As believers we can say "God is in me. I will not be moved." The psalm also says: "Be still and know that I am God." It does not

mean to just be quiet. It means to drop, relax, let go. Some translations say “cease striving.” There are many reasons for fear in this world, even reasons to have terror. There are wars and rumors of wars, There are stories of horrible atrocities and senseless shootings. It is enough to keep us awake at night and to make us tremble during the day. Perhaps as you sit here today you are afraid. Yes, there are multiple reasons fear. But God is our refuge and strength. Martin Luther wrote a beautiful hymn called “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”. It is informally known as the Lutheran National Anthem. Some of the lyrics go like this: “A mighty fortress is our God. A bulwark never failing. And although this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us. We will not fear for God for God has willed his truth to triumph through us. The Prince of Darkness grim, We tremble not for him. His rage we can endure. For lo his doom is sure. The little word shall fell him.” We have the strength of the mighty power of God, and God’s mighty word and truth. Let us take courage in both hands. God is our refuge and faith. We shall not fear. We are to hope and trust in God and God’s power in the worst of times, When we are beset by troubles on all sides, we can be sure that God is with us and will bear us up under our burdens. God is all sufficient.

Let us face it – the Bible never promises that we will never suffer. Rather it is a book about people who refused to let go of their faith in the face of that suffering. A really good book on the topic of suffering is Why?, written by

Reverend Adam Hamilton. It tells us that everything that happens may not be God's will, but God can use everything for God's purposes. Our task is to adjust to the problems of life like adjusting the sails on a sailboat. How are we to respond to worldwide hunger, for example? Rather than to simply bemoan the situation, we are instead to take action and help to provide. What about problems caused by sickness? It is simply the reality that our frail human bodies will eventually get sick. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. We must trust in God and let God carry us. Suffering never has the final word in the Christian faith. God does not give us our problems, but God will use such things for godly purposes if we allow it.

Sometimes during times of distress we may question God, wondering why our prayers seemingly go unanswered. We plead for relief, and the situation seems unchanged. How can we keep faith when this happens? Hamilton has some excellent insight into this. We need to believe that even if our prayers are not answered as we would wish, God does not abandon us. God works through nature and other people. We must also remember that God is the ultimate source of good things. We cannot use God like a vending machine, putting our prayers in and expecting a certain outcome. That just is not how it works. Sometimes it is hard to see what God is doing, but the fact is that God is always working for good.

So when we go through hard times, let us remember to always pray boldly. Suffering never has the last word. We are all called to collaborate in the writing of our life's story. So keep the faith and keep that connection to God. Be still and know that God is with you and loves you. We can rest in that blessed assurance. Amen.