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Charlotte, North Carolina
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Preached and edited a little by Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Psalm 46

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The text for the sermon this morning is the Psalm, and it may be helpful to read it through as a lesson:

Psalm 46

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
- ³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.
- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- ⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.
- ⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah
- ⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.
- ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.
- ¹⁰ "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 of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. (Psalm 46, ESV)

As you know, this Psalm is the basis for Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," which we will be singing as our great closing hymn this morning. Like Luther's hymn,

Psalm 46 is an aggressive Psalm of confidence in the Lord God of Israel. It celebrates God's power and faithfulness, his protection of his people in the midst of trouble and conflict.

I.

The Psalm depicts a world of chaos and violence in which God is our *refuge*. The word can mean, quite simply, a shelter from the rain, or any place to which we run for safety amidst danger. But God is not only our refuge; he's our *strength*. We don't cower helplessly in God; he is a "very present help" in the midst of trouble. The word translated "help" has the ordinary meaning of military assistance: God is like an army come to our aid. He doesn't simply help us to *cope*; he helps us to *triumph*.

"Trouble" ("a very present help in *trouble*") is an ordinary sort of word, but it covers a great deal of our lives. Our culture gives us the illusion that we should be in charge of our lives, that we can engineer our own happiness if we only get the right attitude, the right diet, the right techniques for living. Bookstores are full of "self-help" books and they may sometimes give useful advice. But their huge popularity also reflects the illusion that all the help we need comes from within ourselves, that, properly trained, our own inner strength will be enough to see us through.

"Troubles" challenge that illusion. The word literally means a "tight place," a situation in which things close in on us and squeeze us so we can't move forward. When we come into tight places, we are no longer in control. The hard edges of reality bear in upon us; forces and events beyond our control press hard on us so that just breathing becomes hard work.

Our Psalm is talking about troubles on a grand scale:

² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
 though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
³ though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

To understand this image, we need to remember the first chapter of Genesis. After God has distinguished light from darkness and separated the heavens from the earth, on the third day he proceeds to organize the world under the heavens so that it may be a home for living things. His first act making the world habitable, fit for life, is to divide the waters from the dry land, distinguishing Earth from the Seas.

What our Psalm is envisioning therefore is nothing less than the *unmaking of the habitable world*. The dry land gives way to the uncontrollable waters. The mountains

collapse and sink down into the ocean deeps. The waters are boiling and bellowing and foaming in tumult. Even before they fall the mountains shake violently as the waters rage and rise. The world returns to chaos; the order that made life possible is undone; we see before us *a world in which we can no longer live*.

The image of a world violently thrown into uninhabitable chaos is strong and startling, but we are not unacquainted with the unmaking of worlds. Our worlds are unmade when the things we count on fall apart and slide away. The waters have risen up and overwhelmed us. Forces beyond our control have crashed into us and what we thought was solid and reliable has crumbled and collapsed. We had a life that made sense to us, and *now we can't have that life anymore*.

The truth is that our little worlds were always more fragile than we thought. How many different things can unmake them! The fortunes of our country or our city, the death of a loved one, the disintegration of a marriage, the loss of a job, illness, aging, the prospect of our own death, the discovery of darkness in our own hearts – there's no point in making a gloomy list longer. Each of us can make our own list, and the longer we have lived, the longer the list is likely to be.

This is the situation in which the Psalm promises us that God is our strength, in which he comes to our aid like a conquering army. Who indeed could overcome the unmaking of the world besides the Creator of the world? The one who makes habitable worlds has power to remake them. The Lord God of Israel is in command of the waters; as another Psalm tells us, they flee when he rebukes them and run away when he thunders. Then the mountains rise up to their rightful heights and the valleys sink down to the places he has appointed for them (cf. Psalm 104:6-7).

Now the New Testament has taught us Christians to understand God's power over the waters of chaos in a new way. Do you remember the story in which Jesus and the disciples are crossing a lake, and a storm comes up? The boat is filling up, the disciples are struggling to stay afloat, and all the time Jesus is sleeping. Finally they wake Jesus in a panic, and according to Saint Luke, "he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm." Then Jesus says to them, "Where is your faith?" But the disciples are afraid and wondering, and they ask themselves: "*Who is this, then, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?*" (Luke 8:22-25).

Martin Luther knew that our refuge and strength amidst the raging waters that unmake our world is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate for us:

But now a champion comes to fight,
Whom God himself elected.
Ask who this may be:
Lord of hosts is he!
Jesus Christ our Lord,
God's only Son adored.
He holds the field victorious.

The Lord God of Israel, the Lord of hosts himself, has come down from heaven; the Son of God has taken human flesh and blood in order to defeat the powers of sin and chaos. He is the King and champion of his people; in a more literal translation, he is “the right Man” who “fights for us.” In his baptism, the Lord went down into the waters, and this was an image and a foretelling of his death. The earth was giving way, and the mountains were falling into the heart of the sea, sin and death were swallowing up God's creation, when the Lord Jesus Christ went down into the power of death, the great power of unmaking. Another Psalm anticipates his prayer on the cross:

Save me, O God!
For the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink into deep mire
where there is no foothold.
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me (Psalm 68:1-2).

Our Lord went down into the heart of the chaos, but the waters could not hold him, death could not undo him. The raging waters fled when he rebuked them; when he rose again on the third day, a new world emerged from the waters of death. The resurrection of Jesus is the great *remaking* of the world; in him, the city of God triumphs over chaos and destruction. The risen Christ is therefore our refuge and strength when our own worlds are unmade. Through faith in him, we find solid ground on which to stand; indeed, we enter into a new world that has already overcome chaos and death.

II.

After the opening verses, with all their storm and stress, our Psalm suddenly changes tone: the air of tumult gives way to an atmosphere of calm and assurance:

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

In its original context, this may refer to a tunnel that brought water into the city from the spring of Gihon, the major water source for ancient Jerusalem – a serious concern for a city under siege. But rivers and the dwelling place of God go together in the Bible, and sometimes a river is more than just a river.

Remember that the Garden which God planted in the beginning, the holy place in which our first parents lived in communion with God, was watered by a river that divided into four tributary rivers that flowed out to give life to the world (Genesis 2:10-14).

In Ezekiel’s vision of a new temple, the water flows from inside the Most Holy Place where God is present, swelling into a great river that pours into the Dead Sea, sweetening its briny water so that it teems with life (Ezekiel 47:1-12).

In the Book of Revelation, Ezekiel’s vision is replayed and done one better: there is no separate temple in the New Jerusalem, because the whole city is now the Most Holy Place where God dwells (Revelation 21:22), and the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and the Lamb down the main street of the city, with the tree of life growing on either side, now no longer guarded and forbidden: “its leaves are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2).

In light of all this, we can understand something more about the new life that we receive in Christ, the new world we find in Christ when our own worlds are unmade. It is, to begin with, life in a *city*. It is not a solitary life; it is a life lived with others. You at Immanuel know more about cities than the writer of this sermon: you know how cities bring together people of every background and culture. When the Book of Revelation says that the kings of the nations will bring their treasures into Jerusalem (Revelation 21:24-26, I would imagine that New Yorkers would nod their heads: just walk down the street to see the treasures of the nations brought together in the city! God’s City, the New Jerusalem, is also a rich and diverse community: its people have been ransomed from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). But more important than what we bring *to* the city is what we *find* there: “There is a river, whose streams make glad the city of God.” Water flows from the heart of this city; water for cleansing and sustaining life and making dry ground fertile. The source of the water is *inside* the city; no enemy, no besieging trouble, can surround God’s City and separate it from the source of its life. No matter what is happening outside the City, no matter what forces bear down on it, the streams of the river keep flowing, and there is gladness in the city of God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ spoke of this water and taught us something new about it. “If anyone thirsts,” he says, “let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38). Those who drink from the water that runs through the City will themselves become water-sources in their turn, not the spring from which the water originates, but pools where it collects and then spills over to those around them.

According to John, Jesus was talking about the gift of the Holy Spirit. That shouldn’t surprise us: what else is poured out on us from the throne of God and of the Lamb besides the Holy Spirit? As St. Peter said on the Day of Pentecost: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:32-33). It is the Holy Spirit who brings gladness to the City; the Spirit is the source of life within the City that sustains it through every trouble.

III.

The secret of the City, then, is that “God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved.” God and the Lamb have their thrones there; those who attack the City and her citizens have bitten off more than they can chew. “I am certain,” says St. Paul, “that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

Notice the pronoun: *us*. None of these things can separate *us* from the love of God because we *are* the City of God in our gathering around the word and the sacrament. To be sure, we are waiting for the day when the New Jerusalem will come down out of heaven from God, shining with the glory of God (Revelation 21:10-11). But we already became citizens of that City when we were washed in the water of life in Holy Baptism. We gather already as the people of the New Jerusalem, taking part in the life of the City. God and the Lamb dwell hiddenly in the church through his holy word and his holy sacraments. The Lamb who was slain sits enthroned on the altar when we celebrate the Holy Communion, and the water of life flows out to refresh the thirsty, cleanse what has become soiled, and irrigate dry ground. God is in *our* midst, and *we* shall not be moved!

The Psalm goes on to describe the Lord God’s defense of the City against its attackers and his great victory over them. Luther brings out the most striking point in this part of the Psalm: What is God’s weapon? What mighty armament breaks the bow and

shatters the spear of the enemy, and burns their chariots with fire. Just this: “He utters his voice...” There is no heathen story here of a god striving mightily with hostile powers, as the gods of Olympus fought with each other on the plains of Troy. No, our God is the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. In the beginning, “he spoke and it came to be; he commanded and it stood firm” (Psalm 33:9). In the same way, Jesus calmed the storm that threatened his disciples with a word: he rebuked the winds and the raging waves, and they ceased.” Focusing all the enemies of God’s people in the “old, evil foe,” the prince of this world, Luther captures the message of the Psalm very well: “one little word subdues him.”

That little word, we Christians know, is the word of the *gospel*, the word that proclaims Jesus Christ. That word, according to St. Paul, is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16); it delivers those who believe from sin, death, and the devil. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,” says the Apostle, “teaching and admonishing one another, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). When this little word dwells richly among us, then God is in our midst; it is our defense against the old evil foe and all the forces that serve him.

IV.

Given everything, it’s appropriate that except for a final refrain, God himself has the last word in Psalm 46:

¹⁰ “Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!”

This famous command, “Be still,” can be understood in two ways. It could be understood as a word addressed to the enemies of the City: “Let it go! Give up! You can’t win.” But it can also be read as addressed to the people of Jerusalem: “Calm down! Don’t panic, but think!” The pronoun is crucial: *I* am God, *I* the Lord, *I* the Father of Jesus Christ! *I* am the one who rules over all. Not our enemies, not the stresses and strains and sorrows of our life, not the forces which unmake our worlds, but the Lord, the God of Israel, the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead – it is *he* who will be exalted! He will be exalted in his deliverance of his people. Remember what Moses said to the people of Israel, when they stood on the bank of the Red Sea and saw Pharaoh’s chariots coming closer and closer: “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom

you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.” (Exodus 14:13).

This stillness, this silence, is the silence of mindful faith, faith reckoning confidently with God’s promise. The old spiritual writers spoke of “recollection,” literally “collecting” our scattered thoughts and feelings and gathering ourselves around God’s word. When our world is being unmade, even when the forces of unmaking are just pushing and prodding, it’s easy to be distracted. We start thinking in terms of just coping, getting by, making it until quitting time or bedtime or the weekend, making it through the day, through the hour, or through the next ten minutes. We forget that life in the New Jerusalem is not just a struggle to survive; the streams of the river *make glad* the City of God.

To be sure, we have not yet come to the moment in which God will wipe away every tear from every eye: Mourning and anxiety and fretfulness are inevitable in this life; no one is a bad Christian for feeling them. But *this* life is not our *only* life: we also share in the life of the City. The streams still flow and will always flow. We’re not talking about a trickle of water; as in Ezekiel’s prophesy, the water comes forth from the Most Holy Place and grows into a great river that can turn a Dead Sea sweet and fill it with life. In the midst of mourning and anxiety and fretfulness, therefore, let’s remember that the water of life is pouring out for us right here, right in this place. We are up to our waist in it; it rushes all about us. “Be still and know that I am God.” Recollect yourself; drink and be gladdened in spite of everything. Perhaps the words of another Psalm that talks about refuge and rivers will make the best ending:

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light do we see light (Psalm 36:7-9).

To the only God, our refuge and strength, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be glory now and forever. Amen.

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