

Sermon Manuscript
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Psalm (Psalter) 46:1 God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved and the hills be carried into the midst of the sea, ³ though its waters rage and swell and though the mountains shake at its tempest.⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling place of the Most High. ⁵ God is in the midst of her, therefore she shall not be moved. God shall help her at the break of day. ⁶ The nations are in uproar, and the kingdoms are moved, but God has lifted his voice, and the earth shall melt away. ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. ⁸ O come and behold the works of the LORD, what devastations he has brought upon the earth. ⁹ He makes wars cease in all the world; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; and burns the chariots in the fire.¹⁰ "Be still then 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 refuge.

Luke 23:35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.

God Is our Refuge and Strength

With all the ways our life can be shaken, the good news is that God *is* our refuge and strength.

What do we do when anxiety rises within us? Today's Psalm speaks of mountains shaking and nations in turmoil. In our modern day language "mountains shaking can reflect environmental catastrophes such as hurricanes, earthquakes and droughts. And "nations in turmoil" could be translated as the various threats to our nation or further escalation of the dysfunction and division that has increased here domestically spiraling into more violence.

When we consider or are faced with these possibilities, our sense of helplessness to do anything to prevent them can make anxiety close at hand for us, because these sorts of things are (completely) outside of our control. Now, I am not trying to make anybody anxious or increase your anxiety where you may already

have some, rather, I want to encourage you that with all the ways our life can be shaken, the good news is that God is our refuge and strength.

And sometimes it might be the large-scale events that trouble us, but what about when anxiety rises on a more personal level, when we're worried about getting food on the table, or whether the stock market will wipe out what we've saved, or when it seems like our families are fraying at the edges? And then, there is always the unavoidable truth that we will one day face our own death. These are the things that threaten our sense of well-being. Again, I'm not trying to make anybody anxious, but simply naming what is already true for all of us. Each one of us knows what it is for anxiety to creep in. But, the good news is that God is our refuge and strength.#

"God is our refuge and strength." This first verse of psalm 46 has always been a comforting scripture that has come to mind for me in times when especially when it's felt difficult to believe that God is good and loving and in charge of the world (and my life). It's a good one and easy to remember right? God is our refuge and strength!

One article I read about this passage noted that Psalm 46 was one of the most commonly preached texts in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks¹. And if we substitute falling sky scrapers for the psalm's imagery of hills falling into the sea and mountains shaking, we can understand why so many pastors turned to this text at that time.

And rightly so, because this psalm of encouragement embodies God's promises through its images and declarations of God's character. It assures us that we can *count* on God to be with us and act for us no matter the instability of the natural order or political chaos of the world around us. And this may be even more important for us today than it was in the age when this psalm was written, because in our age we may have more fertile imaginations for these threats than ever before.

Before the internet and the 24-hour (global) news cycle, we might have only been exposed to news on local catastrophes, so natural disasters or political upheaval would seem less common or frequent. But now, we are exposed to hearing and seeing all the catastrophes that happen anywhere in the world that are played over and over again for our viewing. And it can be hard to turn off! And then the entertainment of movies and television may feed this angst in us about these things even more. So we are catastrophized people meaning we have been primed to imagine the worst-case scenario.#

But in addition to our Psalm, it might surprise us to notice how today's gospel addresses some of the other more personal concerns I mentioned at the outset. And while Psalm 46 promises that God is our refuge and strength in troubling times, in our Gospel reading we see that promise embodied as Jesus enters difficult times with us, even to the place of the cross.#

So, today we read Luke's account of Jesus' crucifixion, and the Gospel tells us that on each side of Jesus hung two criminals, often understood to be thieves. One of them hurls insults at Jesus. But the other one famously turns to Jesus in faith. And this thief can be a mirror for us, not because his crime is ours, but life can place us in similar places of helplessness. And these crosses can show up for us in many forms. Sometimes by our own fault, like the thief, through the consequences of our sin-sickness, including when we've made choices that hurt ourselves and others, or when pride or anger have cost us something precious. Life has hung the thief on a cross and has brought him to a helpless place. But, with as much faith as he can muster, he turns to Jesus with a very short plea. He said, "Jesus, remember me." Now, this request may not necessarily represent an obvious plea for forgiveness or a full-scale repentance on his part. But it is an example of the simplicity and smallness of faith when we have nothing left to hold onto but God's mercy. It shows us that faith does not always appear as confidence, or clarity, or well-formed theology. Because sometimes faith is little

¹ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2022-11-14/psalm-46-3/>

more than a whispered hope, a turning of the heart toward Jesus in the very place where we feel most helpless. So, when we feel helpless, even the smallest prayer invites God to be our refuge and strength or to convince our hearts that he already is.

But sometimes the consequences of the crosses we land on are not our fault at all like when illness or tragedy strikes, or when betrayal or injustice leaves us exposed and powerless. So like the innocent Christ beside the thief, we too suffer crosses not of our own making. And importantly, we may find ourselves on a cross that is not catastrophic suffering. It could instead be a moment when we realize we are helpless to fix what's broken. It's also all the places where we feel stuck, limited, or laid bare, these are crosses too. But just as Jesus came to be with humanity and was there in the flesh with the thief, he promises he is always with us spiritually, whether we feel him or not.

Now, turning to Jesus in our helplessness may not always mean our bad feelings or situations will just disappear. And that's certainly the case with this thief. Even though Jesus is near to him, the thief still knows he is going to die. Similarly for us, it's not that our anxiety will vanish or that we get a mystical word of assurance that everything will be okay; though sometimes that can happen. More often though, God's presence and comfort looks like the quiet strength to take the next step and to survive the tension that we are in². So, with all the ways our life can be shaken, the good news is that God is our refuge and strength.#

In today's Epistle reading in Romans, the Apostle Paul asks this question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, hardship, persecution or famine, or nakedness or danger or a sword"? He goes on to say in verse 38 that he is *convinced* that nothing - nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. And that is the deeper promise we hear at the cross: even in death, nothing can separate us, even that great inevitability of our mortal life surrenders to the love of God. God's love is a love that comes to us in Christ and triumphs over all adversity. And any action on God's part has nothing to do with the size of our faith, Jesus offers us the same eternal life he promised to the thief: "*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*" In the Greek translations of the Old Testament, *paradise* means *garden*, a nod to the Garden of Eden, a return to the place of God's presence, God's peace, God's original intention for creation. Paradise is therefore a place of eternal communion and wholeness for those who cling to God, even when our stability is threatened.

And that is what Jesus offers us to us: not a vague hope, not a wishful thought, but a restored garden where everything broken is made whole, where every wound is touched by mercy, and where our lives, no matter how fractured or fragile, are gathered up into God's eternal embrace. So with all the ways our life can be shaken, the good news is that God is our refuge and strength.

And this is true in the face of anything that's beyond our control:

- With any environmental disasters or political upheaval that could ever come about, God is our refuge and strength.
- With any personal challenges to the stability of our security or relationships, God is refuge and our strength.
- And even in the face of death, no matter when it may come, God is our refuge and our strength.#

Response: In closing, I invite us to hold in our hearts anything that has come to mind about the ways we feel helpless or anxious about the potential for our lives to get shaken up or be destabilized. Now that we've

² Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God. Being still doesn't mean stop moving, rather "being still" is active not passive. It's being still by letting go of control, releasing the outcome and relaxing into the reality that He is God and we are not.

reflected on those things, please turn to today's Psalm in your bulletin and let's pray Psalm 46 again, together, responsively by whole verse.

Psalm 46:

1 God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved and the hills be carried into the midst of the sea,

3 though its waters rage and swell and though the mountains shake at its tempest.

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

5 God is in the midst of her, therefore she shall not be moved. God shall help her at the break of day.

6 The nations are in uproar, and the kingdoms are moved, but God has lifted his voice, and the earth shall melt away.

7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

8 O come and behold the works of the Lord, what devastations he has brought upon the earth.

9 He makes wars cease in all the world; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; and burns the chariots in the fire.

10 "Be still then 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 refuge.

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