



“Our Refuge and Our Strength”

7th Sunday of Easter

May 24, 2020

Psalm 46

Covenant Presbyterian

Madison, WI

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“Do not be afraid! God is with us!”

We heard this message on Easter Sunday, when the angel told the women and guards at the tomb: “Do not be afraid,” and then later the risen Christ told the disciples: “Remember I am with you always.” (Matthew 28)

And we’ve heard it again and again over the seven weeks of Easter. As we wrap up the series today, it’s a good time for a review, just as students review their material at the end of a semester.

Our theme message runs throughout the Bible.

In Isaiah 43, God offers comfort to the exiles, saying:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

--Isaiah 43:1-2

Just before battle, God’s word comes to Joshua:

Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

--Joshua 1:9

The apostle Paul wrote from jail, saying:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your

requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

--Philippians 4:4-7

In Matthew's gospel we read about Jesus walking on the water:

But when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

--Matthew 14:26-27

And perhaps the best loved reading in the Bible is Psalm 23, the good shepherd psalm. At the core of that affirmation we proclaim:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me....

--Psalm 23:4

So there is a lot of biblical affirmation to the message "Do not be afraid, God is with us."

And it's important to remember that God does NOT say: "there is nothing to be afraid of." We see the reality and danger and toil in the Bible and in our world. In the midst of that danger and toil, God promises to be with us—guiding us and leading us, giving us hope and courage.

Today our reading comes from Psalm 46, which begins with the affirmation:

**The Lord is our refuge and our strength,
a very present help in trouble.**

Later in verses 7 and 11, the theme is reiterated, with the phrase:

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

The Hebrew word translated in the New Revised Standard Version as "refuge" in verse 1 is different from the word that is translated as "refuge" in verses 7 and 11. In the New International Version, verses 7 and 11 says that God is our "fortress."

God is our fortress. This psalm is actually the inspiration for the beloved hymn by reformer Martin Luther: "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

We sing that pretty much every year at the end of October, on Reformation Sunday, affirming that God is our fortress—"a bulwark never failing, our helper amidst the flood of mortal ills prevailing."

This week I was biking around downtown Madison and I passed the Lutheran student center, and prominently inscribed on their building are the words: A Mighty Fortress is our God.

Listen now for the psalm that inspired that famous hymn, the psalm that proclaims good news for us.

- 1 God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
- 3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
- 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 the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
- 6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- 7 The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
- 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought 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 shields with fire.
- 10 "Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth."
- 11 The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

I grew up with two older brothers, and we had a small wooden fort in the back yard. We played there quite a bit, usually some variation of the good guys versus the bad guys.

As I recall, the fort was the home of the good guys. A place to be safe for at least a few moments. A place to regroup. A place to plan the next steps to vanquish the bad guys.

And that is about my only experience with forts or fortresses.

Like most of us I imagine, I've never been under attack by an invading army, forced to take refuge in a fort.

But from what I can see, a fortress was NOT a place where people expected to simply hide and be safe forever. Eventually the enemy would storm the fort and take over.

Instead it seems to me that a fortress is a place where people take temporary refuge, for a few moments of safety and new perspective:

- to catch their breath,
- to reload their weapons, to get more bullets, arrows, or water-balloons
- to plan strategy with others,
- and find the courage to get ready to resume the fight.

So when we say that God is our refuge, or God is our fortress, we're not saying that God is where we run and hide forever or that God is magically going to protect us from all evil and all struggles and all challenges.

What we are saying is that when we open ourselves to God as our refuge and our fortress,

- we get new strength, new courage,
- new resolve, new togetherness,
- new hope to continue the struggles we face.

So the natural question is how and where can we experience God as refuge and fortress?

For a lot of us, it's going to church, being in the building. Last Sunday night our small group discussed this, and there was a strong sense that coming to the



church building for worship was a form a refuge, helping us to reconnect with God, to get new strength and perspective for our daily living.

I was glad to hear others speak of the church this way, as it aligns with our purpose our calling: Learning God's Love, Living God's Love.

We learn...and then we go out and live

But obviously, the church building is closed now, and will be for a while.

So we need to be creative and persistent in looking for God as our refuge and fortress.

Obviously we can take refuge in God through scripture and prayer. I regularly encourage you good people of Covenant to read and pray, because I really believe we connect with God through the Bible and times of prayer.

For some folks, meditation and breathing help to connect with God.

For some, it's being outside. Or reading books, or music, or knitting.

Where and how do you experience God's peace?

Where and how do you get renewed and refreshed in God's love?

If you're worshipping with someone maybe share with them. Or if you're worshipping with us on Facebook, make a comment.

You need to figure out where and how you experience God's peace, and then go there or do that on a regular basis, especially in our current situation.

Since we can't gather at church now, we have to make sure we gather ourselves somehow and somewhere, to get the strength and focus and groundedness we need for daily living.

And maybe we take refuge in God by coming to new awareness about the realities of life and death. Now is as good a time as any for us all to have open and honest conversations with loved ones

In ordinary times we have to be intentional about connecting with God, so in this extraordinary time, we have to be very very intentional.

That means we have to be careful about things that might seem to be a good refuge but really aren't.

Alcohol. We like to joke "I need a drink." Some people can do OK with moderate drinking but too many people drink too much, especially here in Wisconsin. So we need to be careful.

Moderation in most things is OK. We just need to be careful and smart—with everything from food to screen-time to work—especially in stressful times. We don't want to get out of balance with anything.

And we need to remember the promise of Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and our strength,

God is our mighty fortress, a very present help in trouble.

God gives us strength and courage to continue the trouble of life. So we need to find the place where we can encounter God and we take refuge, we refuel, and we prepare ourselves for whatever is next.

While some people might stockpile food, guns, and toilet paper, we are called to stockpile faith, hope, and love.

We're called to put on the full armor of God—the belt of truth, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the spirit, and the shield of faith.

And we're called to continue to listen to and to follow Jesus, The Prince of Peace who leads us forward in love. Let us pray

Loving God, we thank you that you've come to be with us in the person of Jesus, that you've called us, and that in the storms of life you continue to be our refuge and fortress. Renew us with faith hope and love, so we can continue to face the challenges and live as your people every day. Amen.