

Psalm 46

46:1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

46:2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,

46:3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble
with its tumult. Selah

46:4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy
habitation of the Most High.

46:5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help
it when the morning dawns.

46:6 The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter; he utters his
voice; the earth melts.

46:7 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

46:8 Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has
brought on the earth.

46:9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow
and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.

46:10 "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the
nations; I am exalted in the earth."

46:11 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.
Selah

Sermon: Stand By Me:

*If the sky that we look upon
Should tumble and fall
And the mountain should crumble to the sea
I won't cry, I won't cry
No I won't shed a tear
Just as long as you stand, stand by me.*

Ben E. King was an R&B singer. But he could have been a Psalmist! Or maybe today's Psalmist could have been an R&B singer!!! Today's lection (with a slight redaction by your pastor) begins:

Though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in
the heart of the sea;
Though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble
with its tumult.
God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore, we will not fear.

Friends, whether we live in 1961, or in sixth century Palestine, or even in Raleigh, NC in 2025, God is present. In the first stanza of today's psalm, the Psalmist tells us that when we stand in God's presence, we need not be afraid, not of earthquakes, not of tempests, not of anything.

And the Psalmist tells us that God is more than just an emergency storm shelter. God is also a refuge amid human storms: wars, tyranny, oppression, civil upheaval – God has seen it all. God has broad shoulders. Even in chaos, God offers us refuge.

Let's review. The Psalmist tells us that God is big, so big, that in God's presence, we need not fear the most imminent dangers, both natural and humanmade.

This is a good place to pause in our text, because while this Psalm was written 3,000 years ago, it sure feels like it could have been written thirty minutes ago.

As we sit here this morning, we know our own storms. It is, after all, hurricane season in North Carolina. We remain cautiously on-guard, even as we also lift up and pray for neighbors in Jamaica recovering from the most recent climate escalation. There are political storms, too. Raleigh, along with our sister city, Charlotte, has become the next fixation of ICE. And systemic storms rage on as well: nearly a quarter of NC school children battle food insecurity, and those designated in the bottom quartile of income remain some of the least likely in the nation to escape the cycle of poverty.

And when we live in chaotic times like ours, it's easy to hear a text like today's and ask: Where exactly is God's refuge? Does this psalm depict an ideal God or an actual God? Yes, there's beauty in these ancient words, but is there also truth?

Perhaps the second stanza will offer more clarity for those who feel conflicted. The Psalmist tells us of a river whose streams make glad the city of God. God resides in the city, and the city shall not be moved.

The city the Psalmist speaks of is Jerusalem. The term *river*, however, is a curious inclusion. There isn't a river in Jerusalem. There's Hezekiah's tunnel, but if it's a river, we're gonna need a new term for creek.

Obviously, the river is a metaphor. Some would say the river is God. I won't argue, but I'll be more specific. I believe that the river is a collection of people filled with God's Spirit.

One of last week's lectionary texts was from Revelation. Had we read it aloud, we would have discussed God's audacious undertaking: the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. And we would have mentioned that such a creation is NOT God waving a magic wand to produce some Utopia in the next life. Nor can such a creation instantly erase the pain of the past. God's statement of a new creation is an invitation for all people to join God in the present.

I believe the river whose steams make glad the city of God, is not a collection of water droplets running in the same direction, but rather, it is a collection of people living consistently and intentionally in covenant with God. Right here and right now.

My friend Tillie Duncan often uses the Colorado River as illustration of faith and impact. What began as a little trickle, sure was persistent! For millions and millions of years determined little droplets of water pushed forward. They made it all the way to the Pacific Ocean, not to mention managing to carve out the Grand Canyon in the process.

This morning, we acknowledge Reign of Christ Sunday – a tradition that began in the early twentieth century as a response to the rise of Fascism in Europe. Church leaders reminded their parishioners that our first allegiance is not to the powers of this world, but rather to the reign of the risen Christ. In other words, Reign of Christ Sunday is a reminder that we, too, are part of a persistent river. The river that began as a little stream on Pentecost over two millennia ago has grown drop by

drop, flowing steady and constant, focused on carving out the canyon of God's future.

To believe the Psalmist's claim, is to remember the saints who navigated the current of that good river. And to make true the Psalmist's claim in our own lives is to follow those good saints by grabbing our own oars, and continuing their work. Yes, there will be storms, but there will also be a refuge.

It's worth noting that the Psalmist is an intuitive writer. He/She senses the skeptics among us. The third stanza continues with the basics – a rundown of God's accolades. Still, the storms of adversity challenge and distract us. We know the God of Jacob. We've heard about a Red Sea parted, walls felled around Jericho, and fiery furnaces unable to consume three righteous young men. And still, still, we doubt God's strength and God's promise. The Psalmist shakes us back into attention one last time: "Be still and know that I am God."

Susan Olson likens this verse to a parent shushing a child – it is a call to attention. I agree with Olson. The Psalmist tells us of a God who is with us past, present, and future. Rather than be inspired by the truth of this portfolio, too often we let our anxiety about the future distract us. Shell Silverstein's famous poem comes to mind:

*Listen to the MUSTN'TS, child,
Listen to the DON'TS
Listen to the SHOULDN'TS
THE IMPOSSIBLES, the WON'TS
Listen to the NEVER HAVES
Then listen close to me –
Anything can happen, child*

Anything can be

The Psalmist tells us we belong to the God of Jacob. Jacob's God is with us, and Jacob's God is our strength and refuge. And because we belong to Jacob's God, anything can happen children of God, anything can be!!!

Here's the challenge for us today. Ben E. King's beautiful song is a conditional statement, whether it's offered from one sweetheart to another, or from a parent to a child, or even from a congregation to God. I will not be afraid, I will not cry, I will not lose faith, just as long as you stand by me.

But what if, Millbrook, we sang this song with the confidence and assurance of the Psalmist? What if, Millbrook, we sang this song with the confidence and assurance of the three young men and the thousands of European clerics who dared to tell the likes of Nebuchadnezzar and Mousseline, "We serve a power much greater than you?" What if, Millbrook, we lent our names, our voices, our whole selves in defense of our most vulnerable neighbors; in defiance of modern tyrants with the same old, lazy, predictable, mean expressions of hate; what if we lived in faithful stewardship of God's inbreaking Kin-dom? And what if we sang this song, Millbrook, with the confidence and assurance of the One we follow?

*When the night has come
And the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we'll see
No I won't be afraid
Oh, I won't be afraid
Because you stand, stand by me*

*If the sky that we look upon
Should tumble and fall
Or the mountain should crumble to the sea
I won't cry, I won't cry
No, I won't shed a tear
Because you stand, stand by me*

And what if, bolstered by such confidence, we the people of Millbrook Baptist Church proclaimed to all who are hungry, to all who are sick, to all who are poor, to all who feel left out, to all who feel anxious, to all who grieve, to all who feel weary, to all who doubt, to all who cannot believe that somewhere, someplace is a river whose streams make glad the city of God... what if we had the confidence to proclaim:

*Whenever you're in trouble won't you stand by me, stand by me,
stand by me.*

Friends, God is our refuge and our strength, and a very present help in times of trouble. Therefore, we shall not fear. This day or any day.

Amen.