

Sermon on **Psalm 46**

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Dear Congregation,

In the age old liturgy of the church the Psalms are prayed together in the opening section of the divine service, they help us to become aware of being in God's presence as well as orient ourselves in terms of where we are emotionally, socially and politically – it is good to be reminded that these Psalms are central to the worship of God's people Israel and the Christian faith community. They are prayers and songs that are sung together, or said responsively, so that the prayers can encourage each other to be alive and present as God's people, trusting that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

Psalm 46 has become famous as the Psalm of Reformation Day – the Psalm that Martin Luther based his famous hymn on – "A mighty fortress is our God" which we will sing after the sermon.

Let us have a closer look at this Psalm – perhaps we can come to a deeper understanding of the Good News, as it was rediscovered in the Reformation, and as we still need to hear it today. I'll read it to you in the translation of the New Revised Standard Version:

Text: **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.

Fellow prayers of the Psalms,

Let's try to hear and experience some of the many re-orienting and life-saving messages/phrases this Psalm gives to us so that we can pray.

It starts us off by enticing us to make a very strong statement of trust: "God is our refuge and strength!" And then, even as this statement continues, there surfaces behind it the reason why we need to make such a statement: "A very present help in trouble!"

You see, that's it. There's trouble in the world, there's trouble in our lives, and we are in trouble! We're not living "the good life now", no – we're bumbling along, barely getting through each day – rarely living up to the goals and standards we have set for ourselves, not to speak of the even higher standards and expectations that God has plainly proclaimed for all humans in the Commandments and in the Sermon on the Mount. This Psalm is not just an expression of trust, of feeling comfortable and settled in the faith – it is not orientation that we are sure of, it is clearly coming from a prior experience of deep disorientation. We may once upon a time have thought, all is well, God is in control and we are fine – but we have known trouble, we have failed in our responsibilities, we have not lived as trust-filled children of God.

And added to our own inadequacy there is even more trouble – the earth we live on is in tumult, fast changing into a desert, mountains shaking and trembling, waters roaring and foaming in destruction and the very life on this planet is in danger beyond our imagining. And yet, courageously the Psalm-prayer insists: Therefore we will not fear – why? Because "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

In my presentation about the Psalms on Friday I described the Psalms as a book of prayers that does not exclude any kind of human emotion or experience – they have the most realistic take on human life I have ever found – none of this "hiding the tough bits" that is so prevalent today. Life is looked at honestly and we learn to see ourselves and our situation - warts and all! And yet it does not lead to despair – though despair is honestly considered and expressed in many words – because the realities humans are facing in this world are bad enough to make despair a real possibility – but through

expressing it – the Psalm-prayers find themselves led to a place where trust can be expressed and lived out of in spite of the terrible despair we often face.

As we continue praying this Psalm, we find ourselves safely in the “city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High” – and this city has a gladdening stream, a river that delights all those who dwell there. What a beautiful image of living in God’s presence. I’m pretty sure that these words are not only meant to be understood as referring to the Holy City of Jerusalem with its temple – although that was a very beautiful city – at times it fell to the forces of the enemies and even when not beleaguered or destroyed there was plenty of evil to be found within its walls. We know what cities are like.

I believe the words of the Psalm about the City of God are meant to be heard more as an existential description of a life lived in God’s presence: God is in the midst of our lives – “The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge!” Even as “the nations are in uproar and the kingdoms totter” – nothing is stable anymore – life is extremely vulnerable – we have experienced this even more than usual in these nearly two years of the Covid 19 pandemic. And yet – this is the message of the Psalm – and **yet** we do not have to abandon hope and shrink away in fear. We can stand fast and unmoved, not because we’re such heroes of the faith, but because God is graciously with us.

And as we continue with the Psalm, a marvellous change is engendered in us. As we let this trusting stance of the people of God become ours we develop the honesty to look:

“Come and behold”, the prayers say, look, see “the works of the Lord”. “See what desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.” Or as the older translation had it, “he burns the chariots with fire.” Powerful, warlike and violent intervention in the history of the world.

I must admit, and I think you’ll agree, we have difficulty looking at such violent and destructive events in history and saying outright that God is behind it all – so much of it does not make sense – it seems so arbitrary – if God can prevent wars and put an end to violence, why does God not do it all over the world? I certainly do not want to belabour the point – but can we at least recognise the deep trust and hope that is expressed in these words?

It is a hope-filled trust that does not want to relinquish the world to blind fate, or dumb chance. It wants to hold on to the belief that God is present in all the terrible stuff that is happening – how is God present? I’d be very hesitant to make bold statements about the how – and yet I find it compelling to believe

that even in the muddled up history of this planet, in which so many opposing forces and ideologies, so much hate and greed is to be seen, even so – I find it compelling to believe that God is in there with us – and here I want to introduce a-historically the Christian proclamation that God did indeed enter history – not as a mighty and warlike God conquering all evil in his path – but as a weak, vulnerable and mortal human being – to be alongside weak, vulnerable and mortal humans, alongside those who are struggling through life, struggling to make sense of the world – or even just struggling to remain sane and alive.

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

Be still, actually the word indicates the phrase: calm down! Bedaar, in Afrikaans. Let your anxiety not get the better of you, let go of the thoughts that are driving you mad, the fears that goad you to hyperactivity in self-preservation and then you still end up in self-loathing and despair. Just calm down and know! Know it, not with your brain power in over-drive, but know it in your heart – as you know that someone cares for you, because you have experienced the caring, know that God is God and that God is present here and now!

It's not so much a matter of thoughts, of figuring out the existence and essence of God – that we cannot do. Just ask the theology students in Stellenbosch about that – it's something they are grappling with constantly. It's a matter of allowing God to be your God by holding still, by calming down, by surrendering all your efforts to grab a hold of God, because you realise that God has gotten a hold of you!

Know that I am God – and know that I am exalted! – Exalted!? Really? A crucified Galilean from Nazareth – screaming in agony to an absent God: “Why have you forsaken me!?” Yes – exalted, raised up as a sign and a promise: I am with you even there – when the despair takes you out!

How and why can I say this? How can we believe that the crucified Jesus is God with us – that poor wretch of a man dying outside the city abandoned even by his closest friends?

Out of my own understanding or strength, I cannot believe it, and no amount of arguing or trying to believe it will change that. I can only say it, I can only proclaim it because this Jesus was raised from death by God, was seen, heard, touched by and he even dined with his followers, He had evening meals with them and breakfast snoek-braais on the beach – showing them his wounds – telling them: Do not be afraid, I am with you. You see, resurrection does not cancel out the cross, that lonely death on Golgotha, he still bore the

wounds of the crucifixion, the resurrection exalts that crucified man and proclaims that God was not absent there – proclaims that that is precisely where God is even to this very day. And I too have been given the grace to experience that. In deep despair God did not abandon me.

So hear it one more time:

“Be still and know that I am God.

I am exalted among the nations,

I am exalted in the earth.

The Lord of hosts is with us,

The God of Jacob is our refuge.” Amen

And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Saviour. Amen