



PSALMS

The Prayer Book of the Bible

Praise in the Midst of Trouble: Overwhelmed but not Overcome

Psalm 46

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First Presbyterian Church - Colorado Springs, CO

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Preface

In the previous two Sundays we have focused upon Psalms of Praise. The first one, Psalm 8, was a Psalm praising God for his creation. The second, Psalm 19, began with the praise for God's wonderful creation but moved to praise for the law and then thankfulness for the redemption that God provides. Today we look at a third Psalm of praise – but one that is different for it includes trouble.

Introduction

Have you ever noticed how many things can go wrong in this life? Stories keep coming out about polar ice caps melting and raising ocean water levels, and trouble coming out of that. Living too near the Indian Ocean seems to bring amazing problems – tsunamis and other big time storms in Myanmar. They say that one day California will have the big earthquake and fall into the Pacific. We have had 100 year floods this year in Iowa. Just three years ago we were focused upon Hurricane Katrina and its devastation. In May, an earthquake rocked China with a terrible toll. Now gas is \$4 a gallon and the economic times are as tough as any in a long time.

There are certainly times when it feels like your whole life is falling apart. Ancient peoples did not regard stability as something to be taken for granted. They knew there would be famines and pestilence and wars and bandits. They knew that health could disappear quickly. They knew all about grief – it was the rare family who did not lose a child before the age of five. Life was precarious.

But our lives have uncertainties as well. Every week I visit someone fighting cancer, someone facing debilitating grief, someone in the midst of a shattering disappointment. Love can be lost and dreams can die. When it happens you just feel like your life is falling apart. There are times when you just feel like sitting down and crying. But this Psalmist is determined to exalt the Lord in the midst of trouble. Can we do that?

1) God is an Ever Present Help in Trouble (vs. 1)

Troubles do come – they are to be expected. But the Psalmist begins this Psalm with a big affirmation that “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” Is that verse deeply imbedded in your faith? The whole concept is found in so many places in scripture – so many places in the OT.

He finds a promise that is found in so many places in the Bible – God is our help. Turn to Isaiah 43 – one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.” (Isaiah 43:2) And later in Isaiah 43 – “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” (Isaiah 43:5)

Some of you remember the book, Robinson Crusoe. The book was written by Daniel Defoe - remember he was a Presbyterian pastor. The story centers around the fact that Crusoe has been in a ship wreck and is on the desert island all alone. His case is a pitiful one. He goes to his bed, and he is smitten by a fever. This fever lasts a long time. He has no one to wait on him - none even to bring him a drink of cold water. He is ready to perish. He has lived a life of sin and has fallen to the vices of a sailor. His difficult circumstances prompt deep thought. He opens a Bible, which he finds in a chest, and he lands on a passage from Psalm 50:15 - much like Psalm 46. "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." Of course, Crusoe does call upon God and his life begins to change.

When trouble comes, God is there and is our help in times of trouble. Help sometimes means healing, sometimes it means deliverance, sometimes it means a way to overcome. God is strength in our trouble. The invitation is that we will not fear. With the presence of God there is another option.

2) In the Face of a Natural Calamity (vs. 2-3)

The Psalmist knew what we said in the introduction - trouble can come from nature.

Remember that the past two weeks we have praised the God of nature. But nature can also be lots of trouble. Here, the earth gives way, the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, the waters roar and foam, and the mountains quake with their surging. That is scary stuff! But this turmoil is not greater than God's abiding presence.

3) In the Face of National Calamity (vs. 6,8)

The Psalm is filled with images of nations in uproars and with symbols of war. John Calvin thinks these images may refer to a story told in II Kings 19-20. The Assyrian army under Sennacherib is present at the gates of Jerusalem. Hezekiah is the king behind the walls.

The situation looks utterly bleak - the numbers are overwhelming. But God is a refuge and strength in trouble, and something happens in the night that decimates the army of the Assyrians and the rest run away.

I believe, our nation looks very shaky. Cynicism and pessimism abound.

Many do not see brighter days ahead for this country. Is it beyond the control of the one who is an ever-present help in trouble?"

4) In the Face of Spiritual Calamity

When natural things happen they often threaten who we are. We wonder - does serving God really work any more? Most trouble shakes our picture of God. Growing older can shake our picture of God. We want life to work out and it just doesn't.

5) The Answers of the Psalmist- There are three summary statements in the Psalm - verses 4, 7, and 11.

The first is this, "There is a River whose streams make glad the city of God" (46:4). This is such an interesting sentence. In the midst of this commentary about what nature can do destructively, there is mention of a river whose streams make glad the city of God. Jerusalem is often thought of as the city of God, but there are no rivers in Jerusalem. Jerusalem sits on a high hill - and has no rivers at all. So what is this city of God? I think it stands for the people of God down through the years, and it has its culmination in the city of God pictured in Revelation.

St. Augustine uses this City of God image, in his classic book by that name, to describe the whole gathering of the people of God, scattered yet part of a whole. When Augustine wrote the book, his world was falling apart. Alaric and the barbarian hordes were coming out of the north and ravaging Roman civilization. Augustine wanted to show the presence and action of God in the midst of human presence and action. The city of God cannot be identified with politics, legislation or earthly power. Yet don't assume that it is something visible either. The city of God is where God's people are present. The city of God is safe, for God is in the midst.

Flowing along this city there is a river. Rivers were hugely important in the ancient world - the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Nile. Rivers flowed out of Eden. Where God is present, there is a stream that fills us.

Seemingly, this river becomes identified with the Holy Spirit's presence (see John 4:13-14). The writer of Revelation picks up on this river again in the 22nd chapter – flowing now from the throne of God.

6) The Answers of the Psalmist - "The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." (46:7 and 46:11)

God is with us – powerfully and personally with us. The NIV translates the first phrase as "The Lord Almighty" but it is literally the "Lord of hosts." The host is the image of the angelic force of heaven. But the accompanying words are that the Lord of hosts is with us – a very personal reference. The God of Jacob is a personal description of God – reminding us of God personally wrestling with Jacob at the River Jabbok. I love the mixing of power and personal relation – our God is both.

7) The Psalmist's Command - "Be still, and know that I am God." (46:10)

In light of all this, there is an initial conclusion that we are to be at rest and to be calm, right in the midst of all this falling apart. Yet, I find resting in a storm to be very difficult. In my storms in life, I tend to get agitated. I saw it again on Friday this week. I was heading to Ft. Carson to play in the Men's Ministry Golf Tournament. I was running a little late, which is often the case with me. The gate I have entered in the past was not available for this tournament. We had to go to Gate 1. There was construction going on around the gate and the line of traffic was long. Finally I got to the gate and was asked for my driver's license, auto registration, and insurance papers. Sadly, the guard reported to me that my insurance card was expired. I argued that my insurance was still in full force – I pay for it by automatic withdrawal and I just somehow forgot to put the card in my car. The guard said that it was my problem and not his. He suggested I call my agent and have my new card faxed to Safeway. I found in my heart that I was not still, knowing that God is God. I was ticked. I did what he said and returned a little later with the card, after being in line behind five cars the second time. The guard was surprised to see me, "Well, you are back!" I tried to smile, but was still not really being still and knowing that God is God. I finally got through. I was really late to the tournament. The irony is that my team won the tournament (which may have actually been because I was late and didn't mess up a couple of holes)! The point is that if I am not content during little storms in my life, how am I going to praise God in the bigger ones? Can I praise God when I am in trouble? And doing ministry in this world is going to take us to risky and troublesome places.

Eugene Peterson describes it this way: "We are helped; not by taking care of ourselves but by being taken care of; not by garrisoning ourselves behind thick walls of indifference but by risking our life in the world with a helping God; not by reducing our lives to the trivial dimensions of a self-help project but by venturing into the unfamiliar and untested polar expanses of grace. The great affirmation and insight of the life of faith is that help is being given all the time." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, 77)

Conclusion

Your life will change. You cannot hide and hold onto it. You can trust God and follow where he leads. Sometimes we just want our old life back –our only choice is to go forward. Mountains do shake. The waters of the ocean do roar and foam. God invites us to be still and know that he is with us. And we dare to praise God even in trouble, because he is an ever present help.

Psalm 46 inspired the great reformer, Martin Luther, to write our opening hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God." At the time of its writing, Luther was facing numerous dangers and threats on his life from the pope and his forces. At one point, he was even forced to spend eleven months in hiding in Wartburg Castle. In the face of intense opposition, excommunication, and pressure from every side to back down; Luther stood firmly for the truth of salvation by faith alone. When he felt fearful or discouraged, he would say to his coworker, Philip Melancthon, "Come on Philip, let us sing the forty-sixth Psalm." Luther wrote, "We sing this Psalm to the praise of God, because God is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends his church and his word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh and sin."

I called a friend this week, in the midst of troubling economic times, and asked how he was. He said, "I am overwhelmed, but not overcome." I thought that phrase reminded me of a sentence I had read this week in study. Samuel Terrien wrote this of Psalm 46 - "The experience of divine presence is so overwhelming that, whatever may happen, human anguish is overcome." (*The Psalms*, 72)

I liked the phrase of my friend - "overwhelmed, but not overcome". In light of all this I decided to try my hand at writing a little acrostic of words and phrases showing us the message of Psalm 46 and the trouble we face combined with the presence God offers.

Anguished, but still adoring God.
Bruised, but not beaten.
Crushed, but not counted out.
Discouraged, but not defeated.
Empty, but still energized.
Fatigued, but not forgotten.
Grieving, but still going on.
Harassed, but not hesitating to praise God.
Ill treated, but still illustrating God's glory.
Jumped on, but still joyful.
Knocked down, but not knocked out.
Losing, but not lost.
Mangled, but still moving forward.
Needy, but still nourished.
Overwhelmed, but not overcome (the original).
Pressed, but still persevering.
Questioning, but still quiet in my soul.
Roughed up, but still rescued.
Stunned, but still sustained.
Tried, but not torn.
Under the bus, but still underneath the everlasting arms.
Vexed, but still victorious.
Weary, but not whipped.
My soul has been X-rayed, but I am not X-ed out.
Yelled at, but still yearning for God.
Zapped, but still zealous.

Psalm 46 urges us to praise God through it all. At the end of the day, as the hymn writer, Hortatio Spafford wrote, we can sing that "it is still well with my soul". He too was overwhelmed, but not overcome.