

Psalm 46

A sermon for the Season of Pentecost

There has long been a rumor that Psalm 46 contains a secret code, and it goes like this: Using the King James Version of this Psalm, when you count 46 words in, you come to the word "shake." (It's toward the end of the third verse.) If you then start at the end of the Psalm and count 46 words in, you come to the word "spear." When you combine these two words, you have "Shakespeare." And, as a matter of fact, in 1611 when the King James Version of the Bible was published, Shakespeare was 46 years old. He had just moved back to Stratford. He would have been 46 through the end of April. April 23rd was his birthday.

If you then add 4 and 6 together, you get 10. If you go to the 10th verse of Psalm 46 and count in 6 words and you find the word "I" then four more words you have "will." If you then reverse those as you would with the number 46, you have the words "will" and "I" and then the word "am" follows. You have the word, "William." William Shakespeare.

One might ask: What's the significance? Hebrew was not something that Shakespeare knew. He knew Latin and Greek, but it is very possible that those who translated the Psalms (eight professors from Cambridge University) did this as a way of honoring him. The major work of his career had been done, and the King James Version has the remarkable lilt of Elizabethan English found in Shakespeare's works. The best English of the time.

All of this, however "interesting," has nothing really to do with Psalm 46. This is a key Psalm especially for Protestants because it is the basis for Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress." We'll talk more about that in a few minutes. But first, the Psalm itself.

The first verse presents the theme of the Psalm: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." If you look at the tiny print, you will see there is a reference mark after "present." In Hebrew, it's "well-proved," that is, "proven help." God is a proven help in trouble. But because of the King James Version and how that Elizabethan English has stayed with us, modern translators have left "a very present help in trouble." You will notice it is in the present tense. God is our help and refuge **now** because he has been that throughout the past.

There are three general images in this Psalm that flow together. The first is the one of a catastrophe, earthquake, tsunami, and flood all together. If you look at a geographical map of the world, you'll see the great rift from Iran south to Kenya. We know there are frequent earthquakes in Iran. What is gradually happening is that part of east Africa is splitting off. The great rift goes on up through the Dead Sea, which means the ancient Hebrews were familiar with earthquakes and floods.

The second image is that of the river and the city of God. For some peculiar reason the mountain, Zion, is a natural fortress, Jerusalem, as we call it. Three sides are cliffs and the

fourth side is fortified. Jerusalem was not threatened by earthquakes or tsunamis, but it fell to invading armies in 721 BC and again in 587 BC.

The third picture is that of the warrior God. That picture begins in the second section of the Psalm and goes on in the third. It turns out, however, that the fortress is not the mountain and the natural land formation. The fortress is the Lord himself. That picture of the warrior God leads to that conclusion about who God is.

In the first section of Psalm 46 we have the first prominent image, that of earthquakes, tsunami, and floods. Because God is our refuge and strength it says in verse 2: "Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea." And as a conclusion, we will not fear.

In verse 4: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." You may recall that in Ezekiel 47 describing the new Jerusalem, there is that great river that is part of the New Jerusalem, the holy habitation of the Most High, the fortress, and the temple of Zion. The ancient Hebrews understood that Jerusalem was the heart of the world and everything flowed to that. We can see that very specifically in Isaiah 2:2 ("It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains . . . and all the nations shall flow to it . . ."), but that is generally found throughout the Old Testament.

Then in verse 5: "God is in the midst of her, [therefore] she shall not be moved." The "therefore" is not there, but that is what is meant. In the refrain in Psalm 46:7 and 11 again it says: "he is with us." You recall Psalm 23:4: "for Thou art with me." And then in the New Testament this is a major theme in Matthew's Gospel at the beginning 1:23 and the end, 28:20. Who is this one? He is "Immanuel," God with us. This theme of Immanuel, God with us, is here in Psalm 46.

God will help her when the morning dawns. Remember Psalm 90:14: "Satisfy us in the morning with thy steadfast love." Steadfast love, which is found in all the Psalms we've taken up this Lent, is promised and found in the morning.

We move to the third image of the Lord as the warrior God. Psalm 46:6: "The nations rage the kingdoms totter, he utters his voice, the earth melts." What is meant by "the earth melting" is the volcanos and tsunamis that plague many countries much more than ours. Earthquakes may not last long, perhaps only a few minutes, but those few minutes seem like hours when the earth breaks apart and melts beneath you. That is the kind of devastation that is meant here.

Why does the earth melt? Because the Lord speaks. His voice is his thunder but also the Word of the Lord is that which creates, as it is described in Genesis 1:3 ff: "And God said, 'Let there be light . . .,'" and in Ezekiel 37:4: "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." He

speaks and the dry bones rise to life again. It's the power of the Word, as Psalm 46:7 says: "He utters his voice, the earth melts."

Then comes the internal refrain of the Psalm: "The Lord of hosts is with us" (Psalm 46:7). The hosts of "the Lord of hosts" refers to the hosts of heaven, the quadrillions and quadrillions of angels. This refrain marks the shift from the name "God" to "Lord of hosts" and "the God of Jacob," Israel's God (Genesis 32:28), who keeps the promises he made to Jacob and his descendants (Genesis 35:8-10). The Lord with his hosts is with us, the God of Jacob, the covenant God, is our fortress. And fortress and refuge in the first verse tie together. In Psalm 48:9, which is similar to Psalm 46, it says: "We have thought on thy steadfast love, O God, in the midst of thy temple."

What is this warrior God like? It says: "Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has wrought desolations in the earth" (Psalm 46:8). It is hard for us in modern English to say "desolations," but it brings out what is meant here about the fall of civilizations.

Recall the earliest known civilization was the Sumerian civilization, and that fell, as well as the ancient Egyptians, and they fell to ancient Babylon, and they fell to the Hittites, another civilization, which fell to the resurgent Egyptians, which fell to a series of nations, and ultimately to Assyria, which fell to Babylon, which fell to Persia, which fell to the Greeks, which fell to Rome.

In more recent times the Spanish Empire fell to the French, and the French to the English, and the English to the United States. It is commonly said to be about twenty to twenty-one civilizations. They rise and then fall. And who remains? The Lord, this warrior God, as Psalm 46:8-9 declares:

"Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has wrought desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, he burns the chariots with fire!"

This is not peace through tolerance. This is peace through conquest. He is elevated, and all the others are brought low. When it says: "He breaks the bow, shatters the spear," this is referring to what is customarily done when enemies are defeated. All their weapons are destroyed so they can wreak havoc no more.

Then in Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God." We can be caught off guard by that. It doesn't mean, as we commonly think: "Look inside yourself." No, the Word of the Lord comes from outside of us, not within us, but from him.

Then "I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!" He is Lord of Lords and beside him there is no other. "Be still," and know that his kingdom comes by his power alone, and it is a kingdom of life, the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah 2:4, and it comes through his defeat of evil, sin, and death, by his death on the cross.

The Psalm concludes then in the last verse with repetition: "The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress."

As we have noted, this Psalm is the basis of Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," the battle hymn of the Reformation. Luther wrote both the music and the words.

We have seen in this Lenten series how later Christians have translated these ancient Hebrew Psalms into hymns to tell us what the Psalm means. We have seen that a good translation is not a word for word thing. Rather, it is an attempt to translate the thought.

When we see what Luther has done in "A Mighty Fortress," it's important to see what he leaves out. Luther does not bring out the earthquake, or the city of Jerusalem, Zion, or the river and the water. That he leaves out the water is noteworthy because in the Gospel of John, Christ is the water of life. One might think he would use that. But he doesn't. What does he do? He brings out the one who is the fortress, who in the Old Testament is the Lord.

Who is the Lord? He is the strong man. In the New Testament the strong man is most directly presented to us in the Gospel of Mark. He is stronger than the evil one; he stills the storm (Mark 4). Remember that the sea in the Hebrew way of thinking is chaos. It is part of the anti-cosmos, and that is also its power. But the Lord stills the storm, conquers the devil, throwing out demons, vanquishing death. One little word will do it. Which word is that? The "Word made flesh who dwelt among us," who died and rose for you and me.

Finally, the last verse: "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." The victory is with the Lord and therefore with us. Amen