

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 21, 2016
Pentecost 14
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 28:14-22
Psalm 46
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:22-30

Although I rarely do so, I'm going to preach today from our Psalm. Psalm 46 is well known to most of us, and like most Psalms, the forty-sixth Psalm is a song. I would suggest to you this morning that the psalm is essentially a song of three verses, punctuated by the well-known refrain many of us have come to know and love: *the LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.*

I believe that the “verses” of this song have much to teach us, so let's explore them.

Verse One: The only security in life is the security found in God (vv. 1-3).

The images in the beginning of this psalm are one of global catastrophe. The earth is literally shaken to its foundations. Mountains are toppling into the sea, and the seas are churning wildly. It's an image of a gigantic earthquake.

Twelve years ago Connie and I and our friends Dirk and Mardi Ellis drove to Mount St. Helen's. We spent the day learning about what happened on that day in May, 1980, when the earth shook so violently.

I'm told that in areas close to the eruption, where daylight turned to ashen darkness, that many people thought that the world was coming to an end, and that

the apocalypse was upon them. In many ways, the images of Psalm 46 are apt images to describe what happened when Mount St. Helen's erupted.

The Psalmist says, however, that we can face such moments unafraid, because God is with us. He's singing the first verse of his song, and the verse is: *The only secure thing in life is God.*

There are times and moments in all of our lives when we need reminded of this:

You sit across the desk from your physician, who tells you, "The test results are back, and we found a tumor."

You show up for work one morning to find out that due to company downsizing, your job has been eliminated, and with it the many years of loyal service you have given to the company.

Parents open their door at 3 a.m. and are greeted by a police officer who says, "I'm sorry, your son (or daughter) has been in an accident."

You are stopped at a red traffic light, and the light turns green. But for some reason, you glance from side to side, only to see a car careening through the intersection at high speed. Had you not paused, your life could have been over in a matter of seconds.

These moments remind us of the Psalmist's first verse in this song: *that the only security in life is the security found in God.*

Verse Two: The only secure place in this world is the place where God dwells (vv. 5-7).

The Psalmist speaks of a place that is immune and unmoved by the tumult surrounding it. He refers to it as the “city of God.” In the Old Testament, Jerusalem was often thought of in this light, but Old Testament writers also hint of the city of God as an invisible city, and not merely an earthly city.

This comes to full expression in our epistle lesson, where the writer tells us that those who have received the New Covenant made possible by Jesus have come to a *heavenly* city, the heavenly Jerusalem.

What the writer has been showing his readers in these chapters of Hebrews is that the great examples of faith who’ve gone before us did not build their lives on earthly, temporal foundations. They built and invested their lives on truth more enduring and stable than that.

Periodically, we need to recover this same perspective in *our* lives. This is especially true for parents of children. It is critical that parents help their kids to build their lives not solely around earthly things that will pass away, but to invest their lives in realities that are ultimately unseen. In the words of Jesus, it is the job of parents to teach our children to build their lives upon the Rock, not the shifting sands of things that have no lasting value.

The only secure place in life is the place where God dwells, and this verse needs to be sung and lived by all of us in a variety of different ways.

Verse Three: The only peace in this world is the peace that God gives (vv. 9-11).

Again, the Psalmist shows us images of a world stewing in its own juices. A world torn by strife and wounded by conflict. A world resembling a puss-infected sore, oozing war and hatred. It's an ancient description that looks very contemporary.

Into that strife God speaks these words: "Be still and know that I am God."

I have often read these words and concluded that they pertained to my own interior life. And indeed they do apply there.

But the context of the Psalmist's statement is broader than our own interior lives. The Psalmist's words are in the context of God's work among the nations, of God's work to break weapons of war and hatred over his knee like tiny matchsticks.

So perhaps we should hear these words in a different way this morning. What if this injunction to be still and know that God is God is addressed ***not just to individuals***, but also to a world hell-bent on destroying itself?

What if these words are not just given to comfort the spiritually harassed, but are also spoken as a rebuke to a restless and turbulent world?

The Psalmist's third verse is very clear: The only peace to be found in this chaotic world is to be found in God, the Author of peace.

There are times in life when we simply need to quiet ourselves, to get off the merry-go-round of our daily routines, and to become sensitive to the peace God is trying to effect in the world. In addition, we are called as the Church to intercede constantly for the world, and to pray for God's reign of peace to settle over our broken and violence-infected world.

The only peace to be found in this world is the peace that God gives. If the Church does not sing this verse and pray it and live it, who will?

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table this morning, we do so with the awareness that outside of these doors and beyond the boundaries of our nation, the world's foundations seem at times literally to be crumbling under the weight of violence, hatred, and war. Peace appears to be elusive, even impossible. Into that kind of reality we are called and invited to pray for and to trust a more enduring reality – these words sung by the Psalmist:

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved, and though the mountains be toppled into the depths of the sea; though its waters rage and foam, and though the mountains tremble at its tumult. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.