

Sermon for Reformation Sunday, Year B

The Text: Psalm 46

One of the most popular Psalms, Psalm 23, is full of rural imagery about shepherding sheep. Another popular Psalm—today's Psalm, Psalm 46, is full of imagery of earthquakes, sea-storms and wars. It's a Psalm often chosen for funerals, perhaps because of its robust reassurance that when the worst happens, God is at our side to comfort us like no one else can.

Luther wrote about today's psalm: "We sing this psalm to the praise of God, because God is with us, and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends His Church against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell." This is a psalm to be spoken, prayed and sung, shoulder to shoulder, standing alongside fellow Christians. It is recited at the most difficult of times like times of bereavement, when we wonder what life will be like without the deceased. Christians have always turned to Psalm 46 when the going is toughest – when one's made redundant at work, when a family member is injured or very ill, or when faced by failure.

The hymn based on this psalm, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, is one of the most widely used hymns in the world. This hymn empowered Christians in East Germany to stand up for their faith against the attacks on it by the former communist regime. A manse in an East German town was across the road from where the communist leaders had their offices. Every morning at 8.00am, the pastor took out his trumpet and played two well-known hymn tunes, and especially *A Mighty Fortress*, as a reminder of the faith of the Reformation for all working there. The hymn tunes no doubt awoke memories of Confirmations and earlier Reformation festivals in the communists. Courageous faith like that led to the downfall of communism in East Germany. As this Church Year draws to a close, we pray that the robust confidence in God this psalm displays will be ours too as long as we live.

What are you thanking God for today? That God has safely brought you through another week? Or for some unexpected blessing that's come your way recently? What's your wish for Christmas or the New Year?

The psalm for today faces the worst ecological disasters that might happen, like earthquakes, tidal waves, and we might add global warming and drought. It faces these disasters with the reassuring confidence that God "is always ready to help in times of trouble (v1)." Troubles, whatever their shape or size, are easier to manage with the help that only God can give. God can give us creative solutions to our

troubles that we never dreamed of. When we hand your problems and troubles over to our resourceful God, troubles that looked like a mountain become down-sized to a molehill. God uses the troubles that come our way to keep us close to Him. God is greater than all the problems we face on this fragile, sin-marred earth.

When hardships and threats to a good future come our way, they often seem insurmountable. As we look back at them retrospectively, we see that we worried about them more than we needed to. Life has moved on and we face new problems and challenges. Nothing lasts forever, not even our troubles. We're safer in a storm with God than we are anywhere else without Him.

A woman's car was blocked on the road by sheep. She found that beeping her car horn made no difference. They wouldn't move. The wise shepherd said to her: "Sheep are like troubles. Show them you mean to go forward and they'll move aside." With the Lord at our side, we can go forward to face the end of the world without fear. We won't be afraid because God is "always ready to help in times of trouble." When our stress level exceeds our strength, we need to remember that God is greater than any of the problems we face either today or tomorrow.

God anticipates what we will need and plans ahead. Nothing catches God by surprise. God is more ready for emergencies than we are. God is a reliable, well-proven source of strength and assistance. The Bible is the record of how believers in desperate need sought, received and rejoiced over how wonderfully God had helped them. Our psalm says "The God of Jacob is our fortress", because Jacob received help from God far beyond what a rogue like him deserved. No wonder he said to God, "I don't deserve all the good things you have done for me (Genesis 32:10)." Jacob clung to God until God blessed him.

God does more than treat the symptoms of our problems. Our Lord empowers us to deal with our troubles and problems creatively and constructively. His help often comes to us from unexpected sources, in ways we could not have dreamed. Even in prison, God brings His empowering aid and assistance that transforms prison-life and those there.

The City of God referred to in Psalm 46 is the fellowship of believers of all ages, whom God lovingly cares for. This community will last forever because God assures its survival. Many of the great empires that have sought to eliminate God's people are no more: the Assyrian, Babylonian, Roman and Communist empires are no more. It's easier facing the immense problems around us in today's world inside the City of God, the Christian Church, than outside. Every call to worship is a call into the real world. When we leave God's House, may the first impression of the so-called "outside world" be that of how small it is – how puny its politics, how pasty its appetites, how squint-eyed its interests, compared with that realm of "angels, archangels and all the company of heaven."

The voice of God is the most powerful force in the universe. We have daily access to it in our Bibles. A Bible unread, however, is powerless to help us, to change us, to transform us. The more the Bible is a part of our daily life, the better equipped we will be to face life's unexpected challenges and setbacks. Our Lord won't let down those who cling to His word. Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but not my words (Mark 13:31)."

When the pace of daily life becomes too hectic and you feel like saying, "Stop the world, I want to get off", stopping may be the best thing you can do. Our God says, "Calm down, and learn that I am God (v10)." We need to discover again the power of pausing. Pausing showers the blessings of our Day of Rest, Sunday, into the whole week. We rarely walk anywhere anymore. We drive to get there as fast as possible. Psychiatrist C.J. Jung once remarked, "Hurry is not of the Devil; it is the Devil."

When we're still, we discover God at work in our daily lives in unexpected places. God's word tells us "In quietness and confidence is your strength (Isaiah 30:15)." Discover God in the oases of stillness and silence of your life each day. Silence is golden. You'll find as you let the Good Shepherd lead you beside still waters that He will restore your soul. Jesus loves it when we spend time with Him alone, and rich blessings flow from doing that.

Turn to Psalm 46 when your faith needs strengthening and you need assurance that God is with you in all of life's ups and downs. John Wesley referred to Psalm 46 as he was dying and said, "The best of all, God is with us." With such assurance, we can go into the new Church Year overflowing with hope.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13)."

Amen.