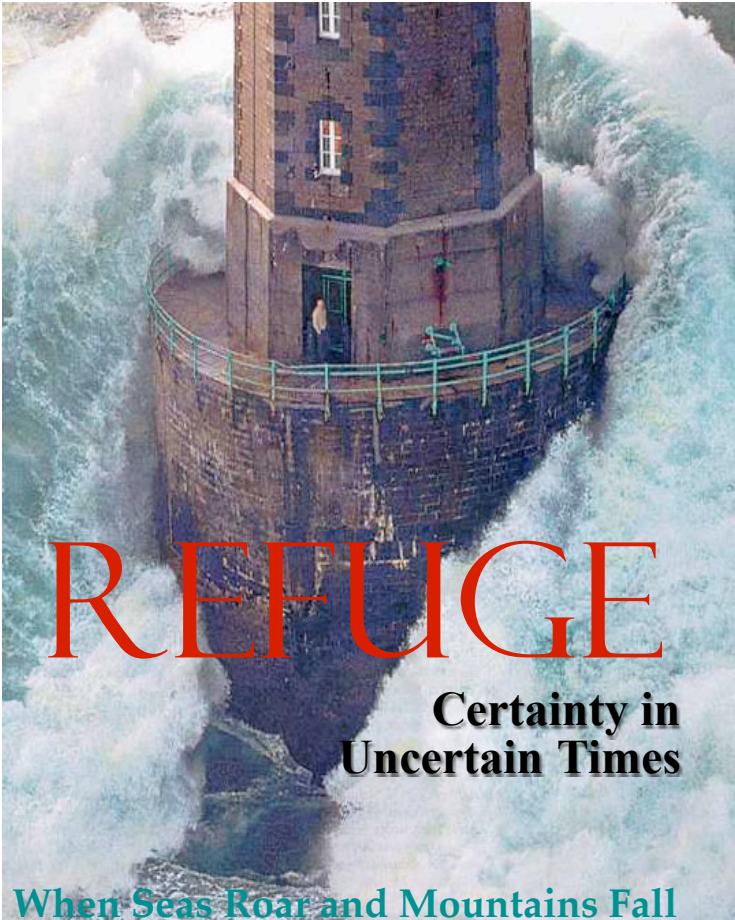


The Covenant Pulpit



Psalm 46

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Think about the terror of tsunamis? Created by earthquakes deep under the ocean, these waves are barely noticeable. But as they move, they pick up energy and velocity until they are racing at 600 mph—more than the speed of a jet airliner. When they hit shallow coastal waters, these speeding waves come to a screeching halt. Crashing into each other like semi-trailers in a massive freeway pileup, they can build a tower of water more than 100 feet high. For a moment this newborn tsunami pauses to gather its full fury. Then it lumbers murderously toward the trembling seashore.

Who can forget the Tsunami that roared out of the Indian Ocean and slammed into Indonesia the day after Christmas 2004? That monster wave had the destructive energy of more than 23,000 Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs. No wonder it killed more than 150,000 people within hours.

But a tsunami pales in comparison to a full blown hurricane. The combined nuclear arsenals of the world couldn't provide enough energy to keep a hurricane going for one day. If it could be harnessed, a tropical hurricane would provide all the electrical power needs of the United States for 3-4 years. During the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935, winds surpassed 200 mph and people caught outside were sandblasted to death. Rescue workers found nothing but their shoes and belt buckles. So much rain can fall during a hurricane that soil liquefies, hillsides dissolve into valleys, and birds drown in mid flight. In 1970 a hurricane drowned half a million people in Bangladesh. A hurricane in 1938 put downtown Providence, Rhode Island under ten feet of ocean. The waves generated by that storm were so huge that seismographs in Alaska picked up their impact 5,000 miles away.

Pressure of up to six tons per square foot has been measured in breaking waves. Killer waves lifted up a 2,700 ton breakwater *en masse* and deposited it inside the harbor at Wick, Scotland. They blasted open a steel door 195 feet above sea level at Unst Light in the Shetland Islands. They heaved a half-ton boulder 91 feet into the air at Tillamook Rock, Oregon.

There is nothing a mariner fears more than a rogue wave. In 1973 a wave broke the freighter *Neptune Sapphire* in half off the coast of South Africa. In 1974 the 132,000 ton Norwegian tanker *Wilstar* was hit by a wave that crumpled inch-thick steel plate like sheetmetal, twisted railroad-gage I-beams into knots, and tore off its entire bow. The biggest rogue wave on record was spotted in a 1933 Pacific typhoon, rising up a towering 112 feet behind the Navy tanker *Ramapo*.

Anybody ready to sign up for an ocean cruise?

The author of Psalm 46 is writing in scary times. His world is in an uproar and nations are falling like dominos. In verses 2&3 he uses the language of the tsunami to describe the political turmoil in the Middle East of his day:

“Therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.”

Like the author of this Psalm, we live in uncertain times. Massive sea changes are taking place in our culture, political storms are battering nations, and institutions are crumbling before the onslaught of economic tsunamis. Sean Lennon, the rocker son of Yoko Ono and John Lennon, captured the angst of our postmodern world when he said in an MTV interview, “We live in pretty bleak times. I feel that in the air. Everything feels like it’s on the precipice of some major transformation, whether we like it or not.”

The writer of Psalm 46 would agree with Sean Lennon’s analysis, but not his pessimism. He writes in verses 1&2, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the mountains give way...” All of us facing storms need grab hold of this fact:

There is a certainty in uncertain times.

Times are uncertain, but God’s not. Mountains may fall, but God can’t. The earth may give way, but we won’t. Waves of uncertainty roar and foam. Who will be the next president of the United States, and how will that affect everything from global terrorism to the cost of bread at the supermarket? Sean Lennon is right when he says that we are on the precipice. But the Psalmist is also right when he tells us not to fear. There is a refuge in times of tsunami-sized uncertainty. Here are some lessons from Psalm 46:

1. There are uncertain seasons when seas roar and mountains fall.

Storms are a reality of life. Florida is called the Sunshine State. But that does keep us from facing a hurricane season every year. God never say that his people won’t go through storms, but he does promise a refuge *in* them. We can’t identify with absolute certainty the storm that the writer of Psalm 46 is facing. We’re not even sure who wrote it or when. If you look at the heading of this Psalm, you will find a few pieces of the puzzle:

“For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to *alamoth*. A song.”

This Psalm was written by the Sons of Korah. The family of Korah produced several generations of songwriters who composed the worship of Israel for centuries. But which Sons of Korah wrote Psalm 46 and when? Scholars have an idea. Verse six says, "Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall..." This is a time when the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East is being rearranged like no other time in history. This most likely takes place during the reign of King Hezekiah of Israel some 700 years before Christ.

A military dictator by the name of Sennacherib had risen as the ruler of Assyria in what is now Northern Iraq. He was bent on world conquest. The English writer, Lord Byron wrote this line in his famous poem, *The Destruction of Sennacherib*: "The Assyrian comes down like a wolf on the fold..." One by one the nations of the Middle East fell like dominos before this desert storm called Assyria. Then Egypt was squashed by Sennacherib, never to rise again as a world power. Finally this tsunami from Iraq turned on the Jews. One by one the villages and cities of Israel fell before its fury. A quarter of a million Jews were set off to slave camps in Assyria. Hundreds of thousands more were slaughtered in one of the most savage bloodbaths in ancient history. In the end Jerusalem stood alone, a mountain city attacked by waves of Assyrian storm troopers. Everyone wondered whether this quaking mountain called Jerusalem would fall into the Assyrian sea.

This is where Psalm 46:1 comes alive. In the face of this fury, King Hezekiah gave way to prayer, not fear. He found his "refuge and strength" as he spent the night pleading to God to be his "ever present help in trouble." That night a plague raged through the Assyrian camp, and almost a quarter of a million Iraqis died. Sennacherib limped back a broken man to his capital of Nineveh where he was assassinated by his sons.

It must have been shortly after this that Hezekiah called his people to a great service of thanksgiving at the temple. One of the Sons of Korah wrote this 46th Psalm as the centerpiece of that praise gathering. It was given to the director of music to be made into a song. Notice that line in the introduction of the Psalm: "According to *alamoth*." The Hebrew could be translated, "For the virgins to sing." Literally this Psalm was to be sung by a choir of women.

Why would this Son of Korah want a women's choir to sing his Psalm? Could it be that he wants to remind them about the most famous time in Israeli history when women sang before the nation? After they had gone through the Red Sea, Moses' sister Miriam picked up a tambourine and led dancing women in a song of celebration: "Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted, the horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea." (Exodus 15:21)

On that day God held back the seas. Picture their terror as they hurried across, a tsunami of roaring seas straining on either side of them. Imagine their relief when they made it across and those tsunamis came crashing down on the Egyptian army that was pursuing them.

This Son of Korah wants the women to sing again to remind the Jews of the day when the nation of Israel was birthed in a Red Sea storm. And just as he had taken them through the Egyptian storm, had also seen them through this Assyrian storm, just as he had been their refuge in a thousand other storms in their history. God has always used storms to perfect his people. It was a storm at sea that turned Jonah around when he was running from God. How many times did Jesus command his disciples to take their boat across the Sea of Galilee and straight into violent storms? St. Paul performed his greatest miracles after he was shipwrecked in a storm. Charles Wesley was converted when his ship almost went down in a storm. John Newton found *Amazing Grace* in a storm at sea. After his daughters were drowned in an Atlantic storm, Horatio Spafford wrote the hymn *It is Well with my Soul!* When I asked my fisherman father when he first fully trusted in Jesus, he said that it was during a violent storm in the Bering Sea.

Calm waters are for drifting along with the tide. They produce soft disciples. Are you going through some storm today? God is perfecting your faith in your storm. There is a second lesson learned by the Sons of Korah:

2. When uncertain situations produce uncertain souls, find your certainty.

The Sons of Korah remember what they felt like when the tsunami waves of Assyrians were surging against the crumbling walls of Jerusalem. He uses two phrases to describe their feelings: 1) **fear**—verse two says, “There-fore we will not fear...” 2) **uproar**—verse six says, “Nations are in uproar.” The storms that swirled around them were not as violent as the storms *inside* them. Where do we go when we toss and turn at night, our emotions churning like roaring and foaming seas?

1) A certain refuge

This song of praise begins its first verse with the words, “God is our refuge...” and it ends its last verse with, “...the God of Jacob is our fortress.” Martin Luther discovered this fortress in stormiest season of his life. The Church had excommunicated him as a heretic. He was a fugitive in hiding, with a price on his head. Three of his children were dying. The German

peasants had risen in rebellion, and his reformation was unraveling into anarchy. A woman toasted him at his 40th birthday party: “Dr. Luther, I hope you live for another forty years.” Luther replied, “Madam, I would rather spend eternity in hell than live forty more years on this earth.” He had entered what St. John of the Cross calls, “The dark night of the soul.” In an attempt to climb out of his depression, he began to live in the 46th Psalm. One night he laid this Psalm down, and began to write his great reformation hymn, “*Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott*”—A mighty fortress is our God.” He had found his fortress, and the doors to this refuge are opened to you today.

2) A certain strength

The opening verse of this praise continues, “God is...our strength...” He’s not only a refuge *from* storms, he is our strength *in* storms. In Philippians 4:13 Paul wrote, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” As our fortress he surrounds us. As our strength he lives in us. Verse one ends with this fact: “God is...an ever-present help in trouble.” He’s not a *past* help or a *future* help. He’s an *ever-present* help whenever we are in trouble. To use urban language: “He always has our back.” Jesus made this promise in Matthew 28:20: “And *for certain* I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” I love the words of a song from a Broadway musical: “Though you walk through the storm, you will never walk alone.”

3) A certain future

In the middle of this song, we are given a new picture in verses 5&6:

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fail. God will help her at the break of day.”

Where is this place? This is the new heaven and earth that we will someday inhabit. This is what the old Puritans called *Our Blessed Hope*. Ezekiel was a lonely exile in Babylon when he saw a vision of that river as it gushed forth from the temple of God in a future new earth (Ezek. 47:1). Zechariah was in turmoil when he saw living waters flowing from the New Jerusalem of a restored world (Zech. 14:8). St. John was taken from the chain gang of a Roman penal colony into heaven itself. In Revelation 22:1 he writes of a recreated heaven and earth: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God...”

Right now we live in a fallen world that is warped by sin. Every part of this creation has seen its original design twisted. I read in yesterday's paper that the death toll from the cyclone in Myanmar will soon pass a 100,000 casualties. Killer storms are a natural result of a fallen creation. The real tragedy in Myanmar is that a corrupt and paranoid military junta is keeping aid from reaching survivors. As many as half a million people may die from disease and famine. The writer of Psalm 46 is telling us that storms will come. Assyrians will descend like wolves. Self-serving leaders will continue to ignore people who have been battered by storms. But a day is coming when everything will be made right. God's rule will replace corrupt leadership. We will dwell in the City of God instead of cities that offer no refuge. In place of stormy seas there will be a river of peace. The storms are here today, but they won't last much longer. Heaven is on the way.

4) A certain logic

The storms of life—whether cyclones in Myanmar, bad news on Wall Street, or terrorism in the Middle East—are the chance happenings of a world in chaos. God is in control. History is moving inexorably toward its ultimate destiny. God alone lifts up princes and brings down nations. On November 5th *his* choice *will* be in the White House. In verse six we sing, "Nations are in an uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts." Sennacherib roared and nations trembled. He thought that the world was his private chess board. But the Grand Master of the Universe uses Sennacherib as his pawn and then flicks him off the board. Verses 8&9 says,

"Come and see the works of the Lord, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars to cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire."

God is not a disinterested bystander. Nothing catches him by surprise or is beyond his sovereignty. The Psalmist says that the works of the Lord are **desolations** and **peace**. He brings storms and ushers in the calm. He is the God of war and peace. We cannot understand life's desolations because we see through a glass darkly. But one day we will understand why Assyrians came and why they go, and we will sing with joy before the God of history.

3. So how do uncertain souls find certain solace?

The Son of Korah ends his Psalm by telling us how we can grab hold of these certainties in an uncertain world. The problem isn't in knowing the

truths of the Scripture, or in reciting their doctrines. It is in living the truths. He gives us three things we can do to have soul peace in raging storms:

1) *Be still*

In verse 10 he says, “Be still...” Stop struggling. Stop complaining. Stop scheming. Stop strategizing. Stop manipulating. “Be still.” Are there any two words more elegant in their simplicity, and yet harder in their accomplishment? This takes discipline. Jesus said to his disciples, “Come away with me to a quiet place.” Have you scheduled an intentional quiet time in your daily schedule where we get away alone with Jesus?

2) *Be focused*

The Psalmist says in verse ten, “Be still, *and know that I am God...*” Our stillness doesn’t help if we spend it focusing on our problems. We need to focus on God and his attributes. Peace comes in his presence. If we strive for anything, it ought to be that we would know him intimately.

3) *Be worshipful*

The Psalmist ends verse ten with the words of God: “I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth.” God is telling us that we can relax because he *will* accomplish his ultimate purpose which is to be exalted in the earth. His triumph is certain, and so is ours. So we should worship rather than worry. Focus on thanksgiving not tribulations. Celebrate rather than complain. For most of us, this will require discipline. We will have to help each other do better. But together we *can* learn to be still, focused, and worshipful. To that end I ask you to join me as we together recite the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism: **What is our only comfort in life and in death?**

“That I am not only my own, but belong—body and soul in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

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