

God is Very Present in Trouble

Psalm 2:1-5, 10-11; Psalm 46:1-7

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle
Sunday, September 11, 2005
Worship at 9 and 11 a.m.

Just a moment of quiet please. Almighty God, now through Jesus Christ, by the power of your Spirit, in the silence of these moments, may we hear a powerful word of hope, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, Amen.

Psalm 46 is the foundation on which Luther built his hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God. It is a psalm about finding a secure place in the midst of insecure times. Insecurity comes in two forms, recognized by the psalmist. The insecurity of the way the world behaves through its environment and creation, earthquakes and floods. And the insecurity of how nations behave who are angry and want to take retribution on other nations.

In the great irony of God, we now, today, look at these two great cataclysmic realities in our day: the flood, the hurricane and the remembrance of 9/11.

The sea and nations both roar—the mountains and the kingdoms both totter. Psalm 46 clearly articulates that we are vulnerable human beings. There is no place to run and hide—trouble will be present for us. We have threats to national security and we have threats to personal security—we live in a world where threat is real. There are dangers of unstable environments and sometimes we exacerbate those dangers. There are dangers of instable kingdoms. There is a cosmic reality that we face: that we cannot control the pain that confronts us in the world, as much as we want to.

In the early morning, 6 a.m., in the dawn of 1971, I was awakened with my roommate in a seminary dorm, with the ground shaking underneath us—California was having another earthquake. It was the great San Fernando earthquake. My Korean brother, who was my roommate, had not experienced an earthquake before and he was immediately dis-oriented. And not only that, he was angry—he had awakened on the wrong side of the bed—I could not calm him down—I could not get him to stop and reflect and be silent because the entire world was moving.

We become angry when we lose control. We know that something greater than us can move us to destruction and we are not going to set well with that. Humanity rages because something isn't right. And when we rage, we often spin into cycles of revenge. We multiply and amplify the problem in our own energy so it becomes worse than the original problem. Both Psalms 2 and 46 address that by clearly articulating that nations take trouble and magnify it. Nations that are angry become enraged and hostile towards each other and begin to try to break each others' bonds and hurt each others' security.

The psalms both articulate that there needs to be a peaceful presence in the midst of the wild times. In the case of Psalm 46, God is in the midst of the city and the city is the people of God. God has chosen out a few people to have a relationship with those people. And those people in relationship are called to be a peaceful presence in the midst of the wild times. The reason why we have a church is to create space and sanctuary so that the tumultuous reality of the world around us is given some space for reflection and quiet. The cross that we sit under and stand under is the cross that silences the cataclysm and the weapons.

The tomb that Jesus entered is the tomb that engulfs all of death, and engulfs the Gulf Coast and all of its tragedy. Jesus is bigger and stronger than all of human trouble. The psalms are trying to get us to recognize that God is present and very present in trouble.

Now we become very possessed with our own agendas and our own hopes and fears; and sometimes trivialness takes over our sense of transcendence. While I was writing this sermon, I was in a wonderful, peaceful place in our home, and so thankful for a home. Then, in the background, I began to hear the dryer with that irritating buzzer go on. My first reaction was: I thought I turned that buzzer off; someone turned it back on. Who was it? Who can I 'get' about that buzzer? Lingering there in my personal psychic spin cycle I began to spin on that thought. That buzzer went off again; it was very irritating and I began to plan how I was going to take vengeance on whoever turned that buzzer on. And I still began to spin some more! I was building up resentment; it began to pierce in its noisiness, and I was totally off my sermon now. But then it hit me: that was what the sermon is about -- not giving-in to the irritation of the noise, frustrations and tumult of the world around us, but finding a quiet space in their midst, because God is present. And then it hit me in the silence: stop magnifying the blame of who left the buzzer on and simply get up and go turn it off.

We each have buzzers that go off that irritate us. The nation has buzzers that go off that irritate us. And if we can hear God's voice in the midst of that trauma and difficulty, we can hear that still, small voice say, "Why don't you get up and do something to turn the irritation off? Stop magnifying the blame; do something about it."

The psalms recognize destructive rage. They recognize it in individuals and in nations—that there is fury and reactivity that takes over—there are cycles of retribution that begin to spread out and hurt other people. Why do we rage? Why? Because it is easy to rage. It feels good to rage—it accomplishes something fast and immediate if we rage. But if we can stop long enough to listen to the still voice of God in the midst of that, we stop raging and we begin to prayerfully accept that we have a responsibility to change the reaction to something healing and helpful. We replace the reactivity with pro-activity... the rage with reason... the paralysis with some sense of action... the blame with solutions... and the attack that we are tempted to make, with an assertiveness of what we will do.

Sometimes we're not sure what we should do. We get frustrated in our inability to comprehend the immensity of the problem. But the psalmist takes us to the core of what is important: that God is present in the midst of the most traumatic moments – in flood and

international catastrophe. Those that trust God are around God in the midst of those places, and they become like a city. Jesus used the city metaphor in the Sermon on the Mount, when he was up there on the mountain surrounded by his disciples. He said to those disciples, "You are the city and the light on the hill."

God is in the midst of the people who trust, and we become the City of Light in the midst of the darkest times. God reflects light through us. God is with us and it becomes our responsibility, because grace flows through us, to say "No" to ongoing conspiracy and reactivity, rage, anger and tumult. God speaks; we pay attention, and the world is changed. There is an assumption in this that is very important, and that is: that somebody is listening to God, because God is speaking. And so we have one simple responsibility today: are we listening, in the stillness of the moments, to hear what God is saying to us about an appropriate and healing response to international tumult?

In the silence after disaster... in the morning after the terror... in the grief after the loss... in the absence after the abuse... God is speaking. Are we listening? In the stillness, we face ourselves, we face our fears, we name our fears, we name the ghosts that haunt us, and we choose not to be driven by them. We choose to be focused in the grace, mercy, love and forgiveness of a God who has come to us in Jesus. And Jesus becomes the focus of our awareness of God's presence. We hear God, we know God, we receive God, and God is in Jesus, the only Son.

We move from the stillness of Psalm 46, to the centeredness of Psalm 2. The centeredness of Psalm 2 is clearly in the Son that God has set up to be King and Lord over all. We see Jesus only at the top of the mountain in the midst of the city. Jesus is the only one who can turn the angry waves and the fury of international anger, with the words, 'Peace, be still.' Jesus is the only one who stands above all the nations and expects that every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. God has sent Jesus to us today to be the light to us, so that we can be the light of the world. Are we listening? Are we able to reflect the grace, mercy and love of Jesus, the Christ?

Let us pray. God, hear the prayers we feel and speak. Remind us that you are here, your Spirit is within our hearts and you are always near. Help us to think and act with care, that we may live this day, rebuilding trust and restoring peace. Lord, guide us now, we pray. Lord Jesus Christ, in the stillness, help us to know you, hear you, and follow you, so that the world might not give-in to rage but to restoration and redemption. In Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.