

First Sunday of End Time; Reformation; November 5, 2023

Psalm 46
Still Be Still

God is our refuge and strength,
a helper who can always be found in times of trouble.
That is why we will not fear when the earth dissolves
and when the mountains tumble into the heart of the sea.
Its waters roar and foam.
The mountains quake when it rises.

There is a river – its streams bring joy to the city of God,
to the holy dwelling of the Most High.
God is in her. She will not fall.
God will help her at daybreak.
Nations are in turmoil. Kingdoms fall.
God raises his voice. The earth melts.
The LORD of Armies is with us.
The God of Jacob is a fortress for us.

Come, look at the works of the LORD.
What a wasteland he has made of the earth!
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth.
He shatters the bow. He cuts up the spear.
He burns the carts with fire.
“Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations.
I will be exalted on the earth.”

The LORD of Armies is with us.
The God of Jacob is a fortress for us.

Some of the Psalms have headings. Before the text of the Psalm itself, there is sometimes information about who the Spirit used to write it, when they wrote it, what kinds of musical instruments or tunes should accompany it, or the occasion on which it was meant to be sung. Psalm 46 has four little pieces of information in its heading. It was written for the choir director; good to know. It was written by the Sons of Korah. Here’s what we know about them: their father was named Korah, and they liked to write psalms. The heading also says the psalm is a “song,” meant to be sung to a lost tune called “alamoth.” That’s all interesting. But there’s something else about this Psalm that I personally would be much more interested to know: What in the world were these Sons of Korah looking at when they wrote it?

Whatever it was, it sounds really bad: **the earth dissolves...the mountains tumble into the heart of the sea. Its waters roar and foam. The mountains quake when it rises.** Were these actual natural disasters, or figurative language for some other troubles? Either way, it sounds bad. And then it sounds worse: **Nations are in turmoil. Kingdoms fall. God raises his voice. The earth melts...Come, look at the works of the LORD. What a wasteland he has made of the earth!** It is easy to believe this language is literal. Never

since there have been nations and kingdoms have there been a time without turmoil, falling, and wastelands on the earth. Whatever the Sons of Korah were seeing exactly, it was bad.

Have you seen any bad stuff lately? Should I go into detail? I don't want to, because I see all the same things you do. Does it seem like the earth is still dissolving? Like the waters are still roaring and foaming, the earth is still melting, still a wasteland? Unless you have your eyes closed and your ears plugged, you are still seeing and hearing the same kinds of turmoil the Sons of Korah saw.

The people of God have been there before: turmoil all around, from the Sons of Korah until now, still. And all points in between, too. What a time of turmoil it was after a lonely monk nailed ninety-five theological positions – known as theses – to a cathedral door in a small town. He was not trying to create turmoil. He was trying to make things calmer, really. So he posted his statements in Latin, so that the laypeople wouldn't be rattled, and he might get some debate and discussion about the issues that were rattling his soul. He wanted spiritual calm for himself and other troubled Christians.

But there was a lot of worldly turmoil that quickly followed the posting of those 95 Theses. To make a long and fascinating story short, the rift between Rome and the Reformers rose to excommunication and condemnation. Kings and princes chose sides, and the continent of Europe was divided on religious lines. The ideas of freedom and individualism sparked by the Reformation led to a revolt seven years later that cost tens of thousands of lives. In addition to all the political and religious turmoil, waves of the Plague continued to strike and kill.

It was sometime during those dark days that Luther wrote his famous hymn, the battle hymn of the Reformation, which we just sang. He is nearly guilty of plagiarism, as some of the lyrics of his hymn are lifted nearly verbatim from Psalm 46. Psalm 46 looks at trouble all around and says: **The LORD of Armies is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.** Luther looked at trouble all around and wrote: **A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon.**

We've been here before. The actors change. The scenes change. But the trouble remains. What do God's people from age to age do in the middle of the storms? First, they praise God with stirring words. This goes to the heart of what the Reformation was all about: what God says about himself, and what he promises. Does God's Word about himself – his promise to deliver gracious forgiveness of sins, his promise that he is for you when all else is against you – does it stand even when the world around you is crashing?

Luther did a lot of things, mostly good, some bad. The best thing he did was not a hymn or a sermon, a translation or a treatise. The best thing he did was take God at his word. Rather than philosophically speculating about who God could be, and what the possibilities of his mind might be, he asked, "What does he say in his Word?" If you want to know whether God is for you or against you, no matter what else is happening, listen to what he says. Listen to him tell you, "I am for you still and always. Because the holy blood my Son shed for you is eternal and constant and covers you still and always. I have removed the soiled garments of your sin and dressed you in his holiness. And so, you are on your way out of that crashing world and to this one that is perfect and does not end. I am always for you, still and perfectly and forever.

So the world keeps spinning, wars keep flaring, famines and plagues and natural disasters keep striking. (And if you think it's going to get better, let me just remind you that a presidential election is on its way.) But we've been here before. Still be still. **"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the**

nations. I will be exalted on the earth.” The LORD of Armies is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. God’s words are not idle, like so many human words in crisis. What trifling silliness we manage to come up with when troubles are raging around us. “It could be worse!” “Chin up!” “Turn your frown upside down!” But God’s word is full of meaning because it delivers what it promises: stillness in the middle of the storm.

His call to be still – always, in every age of trouble – centers on his action. **God is our refuge and strength, a helper who can always be found in times of trouble.** For the Old Testament people of God, he was there, not far off and aloof. He led them out of Egypt in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, and his own presence dwelled over the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle and the temple. He is still with his people, and that is why we still are still.

The Psalmist tells us: **There is a river – its streams bring joy to the city of God, to the holy dwelling of the Most High.** So, what is this river that brings joy? Where is the city of God that it runs through? You might think first: Jerusalem! That’s the city of God where he dwells in the temple among his people! Correct! But here’s the thing: Jerusalem, that city of God, has no rivers. It has underground springs, but the Hebrew word for “river” is another word entirely. So this has to be about something bigger than the city of Jerusalem.

If you turn to the book of Revelation, you see heaven labeled the City of God. The City of God is his whole Church, the place where all believers dwell in heaven and earth. And there is a river that flows through his Church on earth, assuring he is still with us to help us. Christ became this river when he took on our flesh and came to save us, turning hearts to him for free forgiveness and salvation. And the river of God’s love in Christ still flows to us with this good news of salvation in Christ alone, with Jesus’ own body and blood at the altar for the forgiveness of our sins.

The Messiah, God’s Son Jesus Christ has come and still comes to us with God’s eternal peace. Knowing your sins are forgiven, knowing where you stand with God, knowing where you’re heading. That is stillness, peace, and joy in the middle of chaos. It is perfect stillness while the mountains rise. It is a gentle river that refreshes and strengthens while all the other waters roar and foam.

This is why the Sons of Korah were still. It was where Luther – who struggled as much as anyone with inner conflict and turmoil – found his peace, too: in the eternal life and salvation God gives. Christ still comes to us with this peace because he came the first time to give us victory over all the conflict and trouble of this world. He has conquered sin, which is the root of it all, and together with sin he has conquered the Devil who brought it into this world, and the death that comes because of it. When our Lord was born to Mary on Christmas night, he had a purpose: to win salvation for his whole creation, to release us and all creation from death and chaos.

Luther is right to portray Christ as a warrior and champion – a fighter who battles on behalf of others. His triumph over temptation at the beginning of his ministry was a battle fought and won for us, and so was the apparent defeat of the cross; he proved on Easter morning that the cross was his victory, too, the decisive blow to Satan and sin.

And our Jesus ascended without going away. He is with us always, to the end of the age. We find him in his Word, in his Supper, and in baptism’s water. His salvation – his victory – is our peace. There is trouble.

But God's people have been here before. Ever since the Fall into sin, we've been here. But God's river of salvation, of victory in Christ, brings joy and calm. Still be still. Amen.