God's Playlist Sermon Series
Psalm 46
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This faith stuff isn't easy, is it? Believing in Jesus seems like it should be a piece of cake – make your confession, get dunked, show up at church, pray every once in a while – but when real life intrudes and our own doubts mushroom, our faith can feel more like a seesaw than a solid rock. Listen to what one famous faithful believer wrote about her struggles: "There is so much contradiction in my soul, no faith, no love, no zeal. . . . I find no words to express the depths of the darkness. . . . My heart is so empty. . . . so full of darkness. . . . I don't pray any longer. The work holds no joy, no attraction, no zeal. . . . I have no faith, I don't believe." She rebukes herself as a "shameless hypocrite" for acting one way in public while caring for the sick in Calcutta but experiencing such anguish and doubt in private. Can you relate at all to how she feels as she struggles with belief?

Those were the words of Mother Teresa, published in "Come Be My Light," a collection of her personal letters and correspondence released in 2007. I remember the book caused an uproar in religious circles. "Wait, Mother Teresa struggled with her faith?" While it led to great consternation for a lot of folks, I actually found it comforting. If one of the world's greatest examples of faith and service was plagued with such soul-shaking doubts, maybe my wishy-washy belief wasn't a condemnation of my lack of faith, but simply part of trying to follow Jesus.

Let's face it, maintaining faith in God is not easy. And I feel like every year it gets more challenging. As things happen around us, from bad diagnoses to community injustices to political failings, it's getting harder and harder to see God at work. Where is God when a perfectly healthy person dies in a car accident? Or when two citizens are killed in Minneapolis? Or when American bombs drop in countries thousands of miles away? For so many people, what feels like the absence of God drives them to echo Mother Teresa's words: "I have no faith, I don't believe."

In the face of that challenge comes Psalm 46. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble." The writer is doing something common in the Psalms, which is naming the truth that we often fail to see. Thomas Merton said the psalms will "above all, tell us not merely what we ought to be but the unbelievable thing that we already *are*… we are at the same time in the desert and in the Promised Land. The Psalms are our Bread of Heaven in the wilderness of our Exodus."

And doesn't so much of the world feel like wilderness these days? At times, it feels like we're living in the days of this psalm when it says, "though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult." That sounds more like the description of a disaster movie starring The Rock than it does the actual world we live in, and yet mountains are shaking, waters are roaring and foaming, the earth is changing, both literally and metaphorically.

When I went to Alaska in 2016, I spent some time in Talkeetna, which sits at the confluence of the Talkeetna, Chulitna, and Susitna rivers. The point where all three come together is this powerful collision of roaring waters, churning and swirling and foaming and roaring. It was awe-inspiring. If you've ever been to Niagara Falls, you get what I'm talking about. You get what the psalmist is talking about. And yet, when our metaphorical mountains

quake and our waters roar, the psalmist reminds us God is there, a very present help in times of trouble. It doesn't say God takes away the trouble, mind you. But God is there.

From the roaring and foaming waters, the psalmist moves to another water image: A river that flows out of the city of God, which was Jerusalem. Now, what's interesting is that there is no river in Jerusalem, so what the psalmist is picturing here is symbolic, as God hovers over the roaring and foaming waters and, just like at the beginning of creation, brings order out of chaos. Just as Jesus offers us living water, just as we enter the waters of baptism to be claimed by God, so too the psalmist reminds us that God is with us. "God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help in when the morning dawns." Notice it doesn't say God takes away the darkness. But when the light begins to shine, we'll see God has been with us all along.

That's usually how it works for my faith. When I'm going through something difficult, I struggle see God with me. I only see the toppling mountains and roaring waters. But when I start to come through the difficulty and the things begin to lighten a bit, I look back and see where God was. "Oh! That was you in the phone call from a friend or the scripture passage that spoke to my heart or the sunshine after a few gloomy days." "God is our refuge and strength, and very present help in times of trouble."

At this point, the psalmist moves from personal to global. "The nations are in uproar, the kingdoms totter." The Message says it this way: "Godless nations rant and rave, kings and kingdoms threaten." Well, that hits a little close to home, doesn't it? Sure seems like there's a lot of ranting and raving in our world today, a lot of kings, real or self-appointed, threatening all kinds of things. And yet, "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."

Here's something really interesting about what the psalmist says here. There are three major ancestors that are usually referenced when God is mentioned. In the Hebrew scriptures, you'll often hear "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Y'all know Abraham. He's the OG forefather, the foundation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. If you're going to reference any of the three, you think it would be him. Surely not Isaac, who barely gets a paragraph compared to the pages and pages about Abraham.

And then there's Jacob. If the other two are Moe and Larry, he's Curly. The goof-off. The screw-up. The one who stole his brother's inheritance, who constantly tried to scheme his way into God's good graces, the one who wrestled with God and came out victorious, but also with a limp. What does it mean that the psalmist says that the God of Jacob is our refuge? It tells me that the God of the original Screw-Up is also the God of us screw-ups. It says to me that even when I'm at my worst, my most faithless, my most human, God doesn't give up on me. God still invites me to find refuge in God's shelter.

The invitation to "come and behold the works of the Lord" carries in the original Hebrew a more emphatic tone. It calls us to pay attention to what God is doing around us, even when mountains are toppling and kingdoms are tottering. "He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire." The psalmist is speaking the future in the present tense, telling us what God will do in a way that helps us envision that it's already happening.

But is it? Sure doesn't seem to me like wars are ceasing. Feels a lot more like wars are starting. But what this psalm says to me is that violence and conflict are antithetical to who God is and calls us to be. I think that's more of a gray area there than we initially think. Are there good reasons to start wars? For example, the just war theory encourages us "to conceive of how the use of arms might be restrained, made more humane, and ultimately directed towards the aim of establishing lasting peace and justice." I can almost buy that.

But then I remember what Jesus says in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Not “blessed are those who use arms humanely.” No matter what the reason for participating in a war, when we do so we are not participating in God’s intention, but in something that has grown out of human sin and disobedience and lust for power. There may be good reasons to go to war, but there’s never a Godly reason.

Now we get to the quotable part of this psalm, the line you will most likely find on a mug at HomeGoods. “Be still and know that I am God.” But I don’t know if Nana would have crocheted that on a throw pillow if she knew what the original Hebrew actually means. A better translation would be “Shut up and know that I am God” or “Quit it and know that I am God.” It’s not a whispered call to be quiet and calm. It’s an imperative command to stop whatever it is you’re doing that is distracting you from hearing God and see how the Lord of hosts is with you, at work around you. As Jesus said, we can get so caught up in our worries that we forget the basic promise that God is with us.

Once again, The Message has an interesting perspective on this verse. It says, “Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything.” In the Bible, the verb “to know” carries with it an intimacy, a deep commitment to the other. Do we only know about God? Or do we know God? It’s hard to take a long, loving look at God when our eyes are only focused on the next worry in front of us. Step out of the traffic and see that God is God, that God is above everything, including the things that make us worry the most.

The father of the reformation, Martin Luther, was so moved by this psalm that he wrote a song about it. “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing. A helper, he, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.” The more things change, the more they stay the same. Just as the mortal ills of Luther’s time concerned him, the mortal ills of our time may push us to utter, in our darkest moments, “I have no faith, I don’t believe.” If you struggle with reconciling the God of the Bible with the mortal ills of this world, I encourage you to do one thing: Be still. Step out of traffic. Stop and look and listen for God at work around you. God is there, in the person selflessly offering help, in the leader striving to do the right thing, in the people putting their bodies on the line for the sake of others, in the comforting hand and hug when you’re going through a difficult time. There’s so much to worry about in this world, isn’t there? But the Lord of Hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge. And for today, that is enough.