

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Year B

Duane M. Harris

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Text: Psalm 46

Title: “God Is Holding Your Life: There Is a River”

Ten years ago yesterday, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast centering on New Orleans. The warnings were issued and the cloud formations followed those warnings that devastation was coming—and in a big way. A 22 foot storm surge slammed into the coast and pushed miles into the on shore communities carrying all manner of debris with it. After it was all over,

## Katrina Damage

- 780,000 Residents Displaced from Their Homes
- 123,000 homes suffered severe damage, deemed uninhabitable
- 50,000 will ultimately be condemned
- 82,000 rental units suffered major damage, deemed uninhabitable
- 350,000 automobiles destroyed
- 3 separate levy breaches (London Ave, 17th Street, Industrial Canal)
- 250 billion gallons of water had to be pumped from the surrounding neighborhoods
- 1 million gallons of crude oil spilled into surrounding neighborhoods
- 18,000 business destroyed
- Approximately \$25 billion in insured losses

The power of this storm was simply overwhelming. It dropped houses on cars. It carried a 40 foot shrimp trawler from its moorings and dropped it on a city street 10 miles away. In the end, more than 1800 people died—some of them died in their attics as they tried to escape the rising water. Over \$151 billion in damage was done, one of the country’s most deadliest and costly natural disasters ever.

Two years after the storm hit, a team from the Owosso church, where I was serving as pastor at the time, travelled to Slidell, LA to help with the relief efforts. We were able to do that in part because the United Methodist Church was there, organizing people from all over the country--all over the world really--to help those whose lives were torn out from under them. One of our crews worked on the home of Mr. Peter Lebeau. He was a disabled vet who served in Vietnam and his home which his grandfather built had been filled with the sludge of Lake Pontchartrain as that storm surged scraped the muddy lake bottom like a fast moving glacier and dumped it in the homes of people like Peter who did not have the means or the strength to

refurbish his home.

Yesterday was a reminder that disasters happen, the kind that instill deep fears, the kind that can cause us to wonder what in the world God has in mind. Actually, it can cause some to wonder if God is even real. If that was you or me watching those clouds, hearing those warnings, knowing there was a power capable of wiping out everything we have, maybe even our lives, where would we go to feel safe and secure?

The truth is that there have always been such threats to human life. There have always been events that have instilled such fear that people like us have wondered what our ultimate security is. The Bible is filled with those human experiences, and the Psalm we just sang is one response to such experiences.

It's a psalm that has inspired people for centuries. There are three sections in the psalm. The first speaks of the conviction of God's strength and trustworthiness in the midst of natural disasters. The second of God's provision in the midst of political upheaval and the third sings of God's reign and God's trustworthiness when it comes right down to the bare bones of life.

The first section inspired the opening hymn we sang this morning. One of Christianity's most well-loved hymns, "A Mighty Fortress is our God", was written by Martin Luther, one of the church's greatest leaders. It was written, says one of Martin Luther's biographers, when Luther was struggling with severe depression in 1527. As a result of his 95 theses nailed to the door of the Wittenberg church ten years previously and the subsequent protests against the church's abuses at the time, Luther was persecuted for his opposition. His life was threatened, and he found himself faced with the wrath of those who led the church he loved and to which he had dedicated his life. In the midst of depression Luther wrote,

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:

He was echoing the words of the psalm:

- <sup>1</sup> God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.
- <sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
- <sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

*Selah*

"Selah", as we learned a few weeks ago, is a Hebrew term the translation of which scholars are not completely certain, but it appears in the psalms often and appears to mean something like "take a break here and think about this calmly." "Reflect on these thoughts for a moment."

So we hear of the power of nature disrupted: the earth changing, mountains shaking as in an earthquake, the sea foaming and roaring as in a Hurricane Katrina or a tsunami, all threatening to take human life and all we possess. Though the earth should change in such ways and “threaten to undo us”, “we will not fear” sings the psalmist because “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

When it comes right down to it, God is the ultimate power in spite of all the chaos and fear natural disasters can instill. Not only that but God is One who is “for us”. God does not side with the destructive forces but rather is “a very present help in trouble.” So the psalmist sings not only of who God is but also of how God acts—not in the threatening chaos of those Katrina events that seek to take human lives and livelihoods—but rather in the “very present help in trouble.” And so Luther sings, too:

“We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us.”

Thinking of last week and the stock market plunges, we might substitute some of the words: “So we will not fear even if a financial crisis comes in and the stock market plummets to new lows.” “Let the retirement accounts plummet and crumble and let the people on Wall Street and the stock market tremble as our confidence in the economy is low.”

The key is found in verses one and two: “God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble, so we will not fear.”

Selah!

The second section affirms God’s clear desire to bring joy to those who live where God lives. The chaos of the sea as it roars and foams is brought under control by God as God shapes and controls it so that it runs into God’s city and takes the form of a life-nurturing river with streams that provide what the people need. Because God is in the midst of the city, it will not be moved. Again, God will help. And though political chaos threatens like the sea and the earthquake, though political leaders seeking power threaten others with their pseudo sovereignty, ultimately “the kingdoms totter”. Ultimately, God’s voice prevails and such threats fade away. Even the greatest of all empires eventually lose their power and fade into history. Think the Egyptian pharaohs or the Roman Empire or the Soviet Union. One day the United States may join them. We don’t know any nation’s future. Kingdoms melt. And yet, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

Reflecting on this affirmation of God’s presence this last week, I wondered why the psalm mentions Jacob. Why not Abraham or Moses or Isaac? Why Jacob? Jacob did not have

the best of reputations. He cheated his brother, Esau, out of his birthright. He blatantly deceived his father, Isaac. Rather than embrace God, Jacob wrestled with God in the famous story in which the angel with whom he wrestled all night touched his hip so that he walked with a limp. He was known as the trickster for his antics. Why Jacob in a psalm that sings of God's power and God's desire to help rather than hinder?

Maybe this is a reminder that this God who helps and nurtures by working against the **outside** forces of chaos that threaten human lives and livelihood, is also the God who deals with the chaos of human sin and weakness that threatens from **within**. Maybe the message is "If God will help, love and use someone as faulty, weak and rebellious as Jacob, remember that God will help, love and use you, too."

Selah!

The final section of the psalm has to do with the reign of God. Here, God engages in a disarmament program as God breaks the bow, shatters the spears and burns the battle shields. Here God works counter to the violence of war, the chaos of war. Though we may place our confidence in the security of military hardware, God works to disarm that false security. Again, ultimately, God is our refuge and strength, not the tank or the nukes or the fighter jets. In the end, it's only God.

And because this is so hard for people to believe—particularly in our culture, because we are prone to trusting in our own resources--a strong military, a robust economy, a full savings account and solid resumes—we next here this:

<sup>10</sup> "Be still, and know that I am God!

I am exalted among the nations,

I am exalted in the earth."

<sup>11</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our refuge. <sup>[d]</sup>

*Selah*

"Be still, and know that I am God! The Lord of hosts is with us." It is reminiscent of Jesus standing in the boat commanding the chaos of the fear-inducing storm, "Peace, be still." Another reminder that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Another reminder that salvation comes not through military, economic or physical strength—not through our own resources--but through the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. Though we are inclined to place our trust in our

own resources or in the world's powerful institutions, these cannot completely remedy our fear because they are unable to match the power of God.

So the next time the market crashes or the tornado threatens to take your home away or loved ones away; the next time world leaders talk of war; the next time your life is threatened, to whom will you go with your fear? On whom can you ultimately rely when the fear that chaos of all kinds brings threatens to undo you? Consider spending some time this week with this psalm and the insert in your bulletin. "Be still and know that...[God is God]".

Trusting God is our refuge and our strength is a gift that can never die or be taken. When we are able to find it within us to place that kind of ultimate confidence in God's desire to help, death itself cannot prevail. As Luther sang:

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing.  
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;  
Lord Sabaoth His name, from age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.

That Word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;  
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him who with us sideth;  
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;  
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still;  
His kingdom is forever.

Selah!