

Sermon for Sept. 15, 2019 – Ever Present”

24th Sunday in OT – Year C: Texts: Psalm 46; Mark 4:35-41

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Whether it's relationships or nature, politics or warfare we're surrounded and threatened by trouble. Our world has a way of whipping up anxiety quicker than a bartender making a mint julep on Derby Day. A dash of unpredictability with a hint of powerlessness and a smidgen of significance serves up a dose of anxiety. The question then, is this; Where do we find rest, comfort, and security? The short answer is, of course, God. Our first reading this morning, Psalm 46 re-orient us to the presence of God. The God who is ever-present, easily accessible, readily available, and persistently willing to help when life plays 52 pick-up.

When I was 17 I took a Boy Scout trip to what was (at the time) the only Scout high adventure base that wasn't land-based. It was called the Florida Gateway to High Adventure and was based in Key Largo. The two-week trip gave scouts the opportunity to explore the John Pennekamp State Park which was the first underwater state park and covered about 70 acres. I went with seven other guys from my troop including my scoutmaster. With the captain there were ten of us on a relatively small boat and while it was fun the experience of eating and sleeping on a boat was certainly a challenge that we hadn't really expected. I guess it never occurred to us that eating on a boat would affect us in the ways and to the extent that it did. I'll spare you the gory details but suffice it to say that my buddies and I had a profound sense of gratitude when we stepped back onto solid ground...one that I'd never had before or since. The solidity of earth beneath my feet is an unusual blessing whose ordinariness ought never be used against it or taken for granted. It's that memory that's evoked when I consider the horror of the earth giving way as the psalmist describes. But the psalmist doesn't stop there. He (or she) then throws the most tumultuous part of creation, the sea, against the most immovable part of creation, the mountains. But the switch happens when we see that even the stoic and steady mountains tremble in fear of the rising seas. Few things have endured time better than mountains, but their longevity has not hindered their memory. They remember the Great Flood when the waters prevailed above the mountains as recounted in the book of Genesis. This memory strikes fear into the heart of the mountains who sleeplessly watch the presumptuous seas threatening to press passed their limits and reclaim the mountain's title for highest in the skies. But the psalmist tells this story to contrast the sturdy but quivering mountains with the vulnerable but fearless saints. The saints stand still and strong despite their susceptibility. Where does this daring composure come from in the face of swelling struggles and tossing trials? It comes from taking refuge in the One who made the mountains and stirs the seas. It comes from drawing near and hiding within the One that, as Mark's Gospel reminded us earlier, “...rebuked the wind and said to the sea. Peace! Be still!” The immutable Creator became vulnerable as the man Jesus to be our hiding place. Despite constant command over every particle in the universe Jesus found His soul troubled. Jesus was about to be hurled into the heart of the sea of death. And it was there on the cross where, as Matthew wrote, “Jesus cried out with a loud voice...And behold, the earth shook, and the rocks were split.”

At the death of Jesus the earth gave way. **“When the centurion and those who were with Him keeping watch over Jesus saw the earthquake and what took place they were filled with awe and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’”** The earth gave way so we could hear the Son of God say, **“I am with you always.”** In His death and resurrection Jesus purchased for us the persistent presence of God. Charles Spurgeon said that now because of Jesus **“He is more nearly present than even trouble itself.”**

So, how do we experience this rest? This comfort, and security? By taking seriously and heeding the psalmist’s exhortation to **“Pour out [our hearts] before Him.”** This means no pretending to be without fear when your knees are knocking, and adrenaline is coursing through your veins. In prayer, God prizes honesty over apathy. So pray God’s promises back to Him. Hold him to His word. As God challenges His people in Malachi: **“Test Me in this!”** You can say, **“Be the God You say You are. You said You would be our refuge and strength so Lord, please be that for us now.”** Contemplate what it means to hide in Jesus as your refuge. Close your eyes, take slow, deep breaths and imagine yourself in a very secure place. Whether it’s in the arms of a protector or behind the locked door of your home. Imagine a place where your defenses go down because your guard has gone up, a place where you feel safe and secure. Then actively trust that God’s not only available and accessible but also willing and wanting us to hide under the shadow of His wings.

Having said that, though, I wonder how flood victims read the story of Noah. How do they process God’s promise to **“Never again...curse the ground because of humans...and never again...destroy all living creatures...?”** Is that supposed to make them feel better? Are they, or we for that matter, supposed to believe that only bad people die in floods or other natural disasters? I don’t think so. Natural disasters are just that – natural. They happen. We call them **“acts of God”** but God doesn’t cause them. And certainly not to smite bad people because good people are killed in natural disasters and in many other ways every single day. We kind of talked about this back on March 24th when we looked at the story about the Tower of Siloam. So, I think that this all has to do with an awareness of God when disaster strikes. That God protects us in ways that we often cannot see and in ways we aren’t able to comprehend. And that even where there’s destruction and devastation God is no less present, no less helpful. Again, quoting Charles Spurgeon, **“God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand we must trust His heart.”** So indeed, God speaks to us in the storm, in the whirlwind as he did Job, but also in the silence as He did Elijah. What we must do is listen. We must listen and let God be God because ours is a personal God; ever-present and eternal, imminent, as close as our heartbeat yet transcendent. In the person of Jesus Christ, He is Emmanuel, God with us and for us. In the person of the Holy Spirit He is in us and works through us.

The authors of the Book of Deuteronomy and the author of the letter to the Hebrews both remind us that God has said that **“Never will I leave you; Never will I forsake you.”** We can pray with confidence knowing that God is working on our behalf while sleeping with confidence knowing that He will never leave our side. God remains with us in our times of great devotion and in our times of sin. He was present with Adam and Eve in the garden in the intimate moments of fellowship and in rebellion. God has time for us. He’s never too busy for us. And He’s also with those that we care about and those for whom we pray.

God doesn't promise us an easy life. He does not promise us that nothing will ever go wrong. In fact, as Christians if we're doing it right, fighting the good fight, running the good race as it were, then we should probably **expect** some difficulty. Yet when we find ourselves in moments of trial and tribulation we will never find ourselves abandoned by God. Never.

Brothers and sisters here's the thing, no matter who else may stand with us or forsake us God will be there. No child of God is ever abandoned. Our loving Father will never turn away from us. Our task is to rest on that promise to be still and know that He is God. **"For this God is our God for ever and ever...He will be our guide even to the end."** We have no reason to live in fear no matter what may come our way.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.