

For the people of St. Philip's
Year C, 13 Pentecost
Proper 16
Psalm 46
Maria Hoecker, preacher

O, God, when it seems like life is falling apart, be our refuge and our strength. Silence in us any voice but your own now, so that we may hear the word you have for us this day: in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I sent out a parish letter this week. It's up on our parish website and it went out by email. There is a copy in the church office. It seemed appropriate to send this out given that on Wednesday we learned that twelve year old Julia McCallum died a holy death. Also, last Sunday we received word that a former parishioner, Joanne Ware died. Two beautiful girls on either side of life's spectrum had fought the good fight, lived the good life, and now they are gone from our sight.

In the wake of this news, many of us -of all ages- are mourning, remembering, and wondering about life and death. Many of us are shook up. Contemplating the death of those who once were so full of life causes us to wonder when death might visit us and our household. Joanne was a friend to many folks here at St. Philip's. And we grieve with and for the McCallums who now must move through life without Julia.

Any time a loved one dies, and particularly when a child dies, we are flooded with questions. Why did this happen, God? Didn't you hear our prayers? How can you *let* this happen? Aren't you the author of some vast eternal plan? Is this part of your plan? Why didn't you do something to stop this?

There are good questions to bring before God. Go ahead, God can take it.

I wish I could tell you God's answers, but I can't. No one can, not completely. But I've decided today to focus our attention to our Psalm for today. Psalm 46. Open it up again. Let's sit with it for awhile.

Walter Brueggemann, a scholar of the psalms, says that some psalms were written for good times, when all is well and the world is sane and safe and orderly. He calls them psalms of orientation. The trouble, of course, is that life is not always like that, even though we wish profoundly that it were. And so, Brueggemann says, there are psalms of disorientation, written for times when things look bleak and people are feeling weak and anxious, times when we experience the world "falling apart," times of radical change when old certainties no longer hold.

God, is not only present in the good times, when nature is kind, and the sea calm, and the crops plentiful, and children all healthy, and enemies are subdued and quiet. The composer of this sacred song, asserts that God is present and may be relied upon when nature is *unkind*, when mountains shake, and the sea roars—when radical change happens and nothing feels safe and secure. God is in the midst of all that, too.

Psalm 46 was written for people who's world has been turned upside down--when old certainties dissolve in an instant. Accommodation has to be made to new reality, and the psalmist's bold suggestion is that God is stable when all else is not, that God is in the new reality as well as the old. It is God that endures when all else of this earth withers like grass and crumbles into dust. That is important news for all of us.

Sometimes we forget this in our seemingly safe and ordered town, but the world is a chaotic place. It is continually changing. We as a church of Jesus Christ probably ought to be talking and thinking more about what it means to live in an uncertain world. The Bible talks about it a lot. In the Bible, the primary symbols for danger are earthquakes and flood. Of course, these illustrations were also symbolic of the other uncertainties of life – the dangers of chaos and our fears of death.

The flood is symbolic of our fear of being overwhelmed and overtaken and drowned by the demands and chances of life. Earthquakes come without warning and reduces to rubble everything that man had made. The Bible often talks about how to live in a world where there are floods that overwhelm us and quakes that knock us down. Folks have been asking God some important questions for thousands of years.

Throughout the Bible there are illustrations on how we can live in an uncertain world. While these are Biblical illustrations, they are also touch a chord with us because the Bible includes the deepest expressions of our human hopes and longings.

The first biblical way to think about how to live in a dangerous world is expressed in the familiar story of Noah and the ark. Here our human hope and longing is that, when life gets dangerous, God will just pick us up and rescue us and keep us out of the flood, keep us

safe in the ark until the world becomes a safe place again.

The ark is a very powerful image of our hope that God will rescue and save us from danger. If not in this life, then in the next. Many cathedrals and churches have been built in the shape of a ship – the shape of an ark – as a symbol that this is a safe place to ride out the storms of life. This part of the church has been historically called a “nave.” A nave is a part of a ship. It is where you ride out the storm in a ship. It’s the same word that is used as the base for “navy” or “naval.” Look up, if you were to put the stern at one end and the keel at the other, this nave could be an ark. There’s comfort in that, as we sit here together, riding out the storms of this life. We are all in this ship together, it is our shelter from the storm.

Another biblical viewpoint is one that is expressed in a number of places in the Bible, but the example that I have lifted up for us this morning is Psalm 46:

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore, even though the mountains shake and the waters roar and foam, even though the flood threatens to overwhelm and overtake us, God is a very present help in time of trouble.”

The image here is of God who is with us in the midst of the storm. God doesn’t always quiet the storm but God is present to help us, to walk with us, to be with us *in the midst* of the storms and floods and dangers of life.

It is precisely then—when everything is up for grabs, when the earth is moving out from under your feet, and the mountains are shaking, and the sea is roaring—it is precisely then that you can count on the strong presence of God.

So, I’m here to bring you some bad news and some good news. The bad news first. Our life and time on this earth is uncertain. We don’t know why, it just is. But here’s the Good News. We have a choice to make. It can take us through a narrow door. A door that is only open for a little while in our life. We can seek to *believe* that God, our refuge and strength, came among us. Through Jesus Christ, we can believe that God- Emmanuel- is with us, always.

In Christ, we can believe that God is present. God was present as Jesus lived and taught and healed and laughed and enjoyed the company of his friends. We can believe that through Jesus, God was present in the dark times, too, as he experienced radical disorientation: betrayal and arrest and suffering and an agonizing death. God felt it.

We as Christians can remember that God is always with us right in the middle of it all, breaking bread and drinking wine with his friends.

It is precisely in the midst of Jesus’ radical disorientation and resurrection, and in the midst of our own disorientation and renewal that God is steady and sure, our refuge and our strength. When all things of this earth pass away, when everything of our own making seems to be falling apart, when we realize that we aren’t in control of all that comes to pass, it is then that our ears are opened to hear that God is calling to us through an achingly simple song ...“be still, and know that I am God!”

It is a sweet song that endures through the centuries.

If we open the door to listen
it will carry us through our own time,
and this song of profound Love will endure
through all of time.

Amen.