

Psalm 46 10/30/16 Reformation Pastor Bill Uetricht

It is intriguing for me to discover what leads me to preach what I preach. Sometimes I am driven by my head, my brain. An intellectual insight will compel me. If that were the case this past week, Paul's words in Romans would have grabbed me. "For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."

It's heady stuff, good heady stuff. It's the heady stuff that brought about the Reformation. Getting on good terms with God isn't about what we do, the works of the law; it's about the gift of God that comes to us through grace—a gift we receive through our faith, our trust in the gift. "By grace we have been saved through faith and not by keeping law." (sung). That's good stuff. My head resonates with this grand insight from Paul.

Sometimes when I am preparing to preach I pay attention to how I feel as I read a text or meditate on it. Sometimes it is my gut or my heart that compels me forward. And if I were to listen to my gut today I would definitely pay attention to that marvelous reading from Jeremiah. It is full of the heart. "I will make a new covenant with the whole nation of Israel. This covenant is not going to be like the one from before, because the one from before they broke, even though I was their *husband*. This new covenant I am going to put on their hearts. They won't have to learn it; they will just know it. And this covenant is going to be based on my selective amnesia. I am going to forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

I know what it's like to be involved in a close relationship and be scarred by that relationship. I know what it's like to feel deep love and know the pain of love that is not always received or reciprocated. I can feel with this passage. And I am moved by it. "Deep within, I will plant my law, not on stone, but in your heart." (sung) The notion of the law becoming a part of our insides, and not just the insides of individuals,

but the inside of a nation, a culture, really appeals to me. As I think about what I want for my children and the children that I teach, I realize that nothing is more important to me than that this faith stuff, the law of love, becomes a part of them, deeply embedded in them. I want it to change them and us. I want it to soften them and us. Emotionally, I really can relate to what Jeremiah promises that God will surely do in the days to come.

But it wasn't my emotionality that was most fully engaged this past week as I was exploring our texts. No, what really grabbed my attention is what captured not just my mind or my emotions, but everything I am, the depths of me, what the Bible calls my "soul." The soul, Biblically speaking, isn't a part of me. It's all of me. This week I was seized by our Psalm, because of the way it grasped my soul, all that I am, met me in the midst of my anxieties and fears, which, frankly, are fed by my mind and emotions. I was taken by the way this Psalm addressed the entirety of me in the midst of the struggles with my real life, and the real life of the culture in which we live.

The other night I couldn't sleep very well. And my brain really started to work overtime, as did my emotions. I had been dealing with the church finances earlier in the day. And our financial security was on my mind. Are we going to have enough money? I wondered. We'll probably make it through the end of the year, but what about the winter when so many people leave? Will we be able to manage our debt over the next couple of years? We still have a loan for \$925,000. What's going to happen?

In the midst of these kinds of thoughts I decided to turn the television on. Heck, I hadn't seen any news about the election for at least four hours. The news got me thinking and feeling more. Truthfully, this election makes me nervous. What is going to happen to this nation which I love? And when did we get so mean? Have we always been this mean? Have we always demonized the other, gone fishing for every kind of scandal and strange story that we can attach to people? And social media, it only makes it worse, my brain was saying

to me in the middle of the night. Quickly, we can *share* odd-duck notions about the people we need to dislike and want the world to hate. What kind of world are we living in?

And it seems to be a dangerous world—at least that is what the 24-hour news cycle wants us to believe. A devastated Syria. A strange and evil group of people named ISIS. What’s going on? Is the world shaking? Is it falling apart? Is the stability I thought I knew gone?

“The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob our stronghold, the God of Jacob our stronghold.”(sung)

This is the refrain for the Psalm for today, Psalm 46. Probably the people of Israel would sing this after the verses were sung by an individual or a choir. The message of this little refrain was at the heart of what worship in the temple was meant to bring to the people of Israel in the midst of their real struggles. This refrain was meant to respond to the deep concerns of who they were as individuals and as a nation. In other words, this was soul music, music to address the depths of their lives and situations.

The words of the verses of the Psalm are really quite telling. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though the seas’ waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”

Generally in the Bible, mountains are thought to be paragons of stability. Even though, as one of the members of our Thursday Bible study pointed out, mountains are really the result of the instability of the earth, the consequence of volcanic eruptions and tectonic plate shifting, Biblical writers, nonetheless, thought of mountains as something that you could depend on. So even if, the Psalm writer says, the mountains are moved, even if the sea roars and foams, we will not fear. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

Martin Luther found these words to be so compelling for his own life that he used them as a part of his well-known hymn “A Mighty Fortress.” Because he was willing to stand up to power, because he

was willing to speak the truth of the gospel of grace, Luther faced all kinds of troubles. The mountains were trembling for him. The seas were roaring. His life was threatened. But he trusted that God was for him his refuge and strength. Though it appeared that no stability existed, that the world around him was falling apart, he would rest his life in something larger than all the mess.

For the Psalm writer, that something was to be discovered in God, the one he would meet in the temple. He says, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall be moved." This is obviously a reference to the temple, for the temple is thought to be the holy habitation of God. To go to the temple for this Psalm writer was to be taken to the place where he could be reminded that though "the nations are in an uproar," though "the kingdoms totter, God utters his voice and the earth melts." In other words, in the temple, we all are brought to our senses, given the picture of the long haul, reminded of what is ultimately true. And the shenanigans of the culture, the noise of the politicians and those who become like their little disciples, the messiness of my own life, and the struggles of the church, while very real, aren't the final and ultimate word about life. They are not the only reality.

One of the reasons we need to gather week after week is to be reminded of what is ultimately true. There is a craziness to our lives and to the world, a craziness that leads to ugliness and crankiness, to demonizing people and to tearing them apart; a craziness that takes us to wondering if we ought not to throw in the towel; a craziness that doesn't bring out the best in us, but rather the worst in us.

But "there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of God." There is another reality, and that reality we discover week after week as we gather for worship, as we are taken not to the mountains that shake in the heart of the sea and to the waters that roar and foam, but to the God who is our refuge and our strength.

Come, behold the works of this One, the Psalm writer says. “He makes war to cease to the end of the earth.” He “breaks the bow and shatters the spear.” The uproar of the nations, the tottering of the kingdoms in God are done away with. Oh, you say. That’s not very realistic. The real world is a world where violence prevails, where war never comes to an end. Believe that, if you want. But we know of another real world, a world that flows from the rivers whose streams make glad the city of God, a world where love is practiced, where human dignity is respected, where justice for the poor and the left out is done, where peace, not war, reigns. This real world is the world of God, the world we gather to remember and experience week after week in the temple, that is, the people of God, the dwelling of the Most High.

As we meet up with these people, as we come together to the world of God, we will hear words that every week will put life in perspective: “Knock it off. Be still, and know that I am God! Nations, be still! Quit all your maneuvering and posturing. Politicians, be still! Shut your mouths. And let go of all the ugliness and pettiness. And Bill. Be still!

“The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob our stronghold, the God of Jacob our stronghold.” (sung)