

“A Very Present Help”  
October 25, 2020

Psalm 46

Last month *The New York Times* printed the responses people sent in when asked to describe the pandemic in six words. Some examples:

Messy hair, messy room, messy thoughts.  
I regret saying, “I hate school.”  
Read every book in the house.

Cleaned Lysol container with Lysol wipe.

Social distancing myself from the fridge.

Avoiding death, but certainly not living.

The five-hundred-year-old lyrics of Martin Luther that we sang this morning, however, seem to describe the pandemic—and the whole of these days in three words: “Mortal ills prevailing.”

That’s pretty much it.

Covid-19, of course, is *the* prevailing mortal ill. Cases, hospitalizations, and deaths are increasing in Iowa. On Friday our nation set a new record of 80,000 new cases in one day. And over 223,000 have died.

Then there is the racism that kills, the racism that has been with us for so long, the racism that many white people are looking at more closely even as others deny its very existence. And after a summer of protest and upheaval, still we hear of Black people shot and killed for driving, for being at home, for walking down the street.

Add to this an economy that has left thousands without work and without health care, bringing many to the brink of food insecurity and homelessness.

As the election approaches our democracy itself seems threatened and near collapse. We are cut off—cut off from what decency we once had, cut off from common values and purposes, cut off from shared truth, cut off from the basic respect of one another that makes democracy possible—and we worry that these wounds are mortal.

Through all this, climate change and the destruction of the earth’s delicate ecosystem has continued unabated.

Even before the pandemic hit us in seven months ago, most of us had already known some shadow times—times when you weren’t sure how you would make it through: a job loss, a death, a severe illness, difficult decisions.

But there is additional stress now. Everyone seems more edgy, more ready to lash out at someone else, more easily hurt.

Through all of this, we're doing our best to live our everyday lives, which, let's face it, are filled with the usual concerns about poor health, financial problems, troubled children, troubled marriages.

These days are rough and the difficulties continue to "threaten to undo us."

Mortal ills prevailing.

Last week as our Zoom Bible study was winding down, we were talking about our lives. Someone mentioned the increase in "toxic positivity"—declaring that everything is going just fine, that we're OK, that we're getting on. And I realized that I turn to this option often enough, telling people with a smile that things are going about as well as they can, that I'm doing all right.

I mean, how bad can it get, really?

The psalmist tells us: *this bad*—

The earth changes

The mountains shake in the heart of the sea

The waters roar and foam

The mountains tremble

As people at the time saw it, the mountains were the foundation upholding the dry land over the chaos of the water *as well as* the pillars that held up the sky. In this picture the earth is threatened from above and below. *That's* how bad it can get.

And if cosmic upheaval is not cause of enough distress, the psalmist reminds us of the human scale of our trouble as well: the nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter.

In these days it often feels as though we, too, are threatened from all sides.

Just then—just *now*—we hear the affirmation that when the world is falling apart, God is a refuge who can be trusted. We don't have to pretend that all is well. It's OK—especially now—it's OK to not be OK. Instead of toxic positivity we can affirm with the Psalmist, even when beset and besieged, "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble."

This bold affirmation of faith has been called "one of the most powerful and memorable lines in all the Psalms." It rises out of a deep conviction that it is God who is the power behind the origin and the continuing life of the universe. This is not a neutral power, however. The Hebrew reads something like "God is *for us* a refuge and strength."

God is for us.

Mortal ills surround us—and the awareness that life is brief leads to the sense that the life worth living calls us at times to take action with no guarantee other than the love of God. Even in the face of tragedy and unexplainable loss and deep sorrow we can choose the good and cherish life all the more.

So the Psalmist calls out to us: Look! Come and see what God is doing: establishing peace for the people. With the eyes of faith we see the kind of desolation that God leaves behind: the broken bow, the shattered spear, the burning shield showing that war is over.

So stop! That is perhaps an even better way of rendering those beautiful, comforting words: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Stop! Throw down your weapons, your defenses. Depend on God even in the worst of times.”

After all, the ruling power of the universe is for us a refuge and strength.

When we look at our own dashed hopes, our own broken dreams of these days, it is faith, not certainty, that first feels the reviving breath of God blowing upon us.

When we look at all the examples of justice denied, of rights restricted, of truth left in shambles by constant and growing lies, it is faith, not certainty, that first feels the reviving breath of God inspiring our renewed hope.

When we look at the racism and nationalism that encourage the fear of “others,” it is faith, not certainty, that first feels the reviving breath of God enabling us to act in new, life giving ways.

There is One greater than the storms that rage.

There is One greater than the tumult of the nations.

There is One greater even than us and our problems.

“God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.”

We live by faith, with confidence in God’s grace and merciful goodness. And so we are those who cherish this life that we have been given; we are those who cherish the life that others have been given.

When we realize this—and that’s not always easy to do— we are able to move forward. It’s not that there is any less fear or uncertainty. But we recognize that there is something—Someone—greater than our fear; Someone who calls us out of fear into loving engagement with other people and with this hurting world

So we live by faith—confronting our fears even if we aren’t able to overcome them.

Will everything be all right?

I don’t know. No one does.

I only know that even now, especially now, we live by faith. We recognize that, as Luther’s hymn put it, “Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing.” All our struggles—to love our neighbors, our small efforts for peace and justice, our work to confront and overcome racism and hatred—all our struggles are not losing battles because we find our confidence in God’s grace working in us and through us.

We live by faith—faith in the God who is our refuge and our strength, a very help in times of trouble.

We will always struggle with evil, for that is a part of living. But though we struggle, in Christ we will emerge with life.

You see, God is for us. God is for all humanity as we seek the good.

Other people, other powers may condemn us, may struggle against us—but God justifies. There is only one God before whom we stand, to whom we are accountable. In the face of the ultimate forgiveness of God the condemnation of others pales.

Since God is for us, even in adversity, even in failure, even in desperate situations, we can attempt great things, we can pursue excellence in all that we do, and we can face the future with courage.

The Christian faith is not the result of success and prosperity. It developed in a crucible of suffering. In this faith women and men have faced crisis and adversity with courage for two thousand years.

God is *for us* a refuge and a strength—a very present help in this present time. The love of God creates, redeems, and sustains us at all times. The love of God never ends. And nothing—nothing at all—can separate us from that love.