

“Faith in the Age of Coronavirus”

Date: 29 March 2020

Text: Psalm 46

Other Passages:

Lectionary: no

I am sixty two years old, born in 1957. In my lifetime we have not known a time of great adversity. We have not seen a time of world war, like my parents and grandparents did. We have not seen a pandemic like the Spanish Flu. We have not seen an economic collapse like the Great Depression. In my lifetime Canadians have not seen adversity like previous generations have known...not seen adversity like what we are facing right now. Adversity, I think, is kind'a something we've relegated to the annals of history, so we find ourselves doubly shocked by the suddenness and significance of the covid-19 pandemic and by our lack of experience with such adversity from which to draw on in these times. Because it has not been our experience we will draw from 3 stories of our forebearers in faith who faced adversity.

It is a time of worry for many, many people. And QUITE understandably so. The enemy today is microscopic. The news is saturated with talk of the coronavirus. It seems that every couple of days there are new restrictions on life. Our routines and security are greatly disrupted. And to add to the anxiousness there is much uncertainty about how long this is all going to last. This is adversity.

Today we heard one of the great psalms. Psalm 46 is a psalm that people of faith have turned to time and again in moments of adversity. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the whole earth should change” (Psalm 46:1,2). Hear that opening assertion. Even if the whole earth is threatened, he says, I will find refuge in God. I will draw strength from God. I will receive help from God. What do you call that? It is faith. Last week we reflected on Paul's great definition of love. It ends with the words, “Now, faith, hope and love abide, these three.” These three words form a core to Christianity. Last week we looked at love. Next week we will reflect on hope. Today we will remember together the nature of faith...and how God is there for us in anxious times.

The psalm acknowledges that adversity comes in many forms. And the author here puts it in dramatic terms of great calamity. The earth changing. Mountains shaking. Storms at sea, causing ocean waters to roar and foam. Nations in uproar. Society teetering on the edge. These are images of things that are beyond control. Certainly beyond individual control. Dealing with something that is beyond our control can cause anyone to worry. But in the midst of these possibilities, what does the psalmist say? The psalmist says, God is in the midst of it. God will not be moved. He says, God is powerful. God can speak words that can cause the whole earth to melt, so powerful is God. In other words, God is bigger than the adversity. And more powerful than the adversity. Therefore we will not fear, he writes.

Faith is many things, but the first thing I want us to remember today is that faith, in part, is belief. And that is what we see here in these words of the psalm: belief. In the midst of these calamities, he says, the Lord of Hosts is with us. Our God is with us. Remembering and affirming that belief brings calm. This God is with us.

I've told this story before but it bears repeating in these days. Martin Rinckart was a German pastor in a town that was overwhelmed by the plague in 1637. 8,000 townsfolk died that year, including his wife. He cared for the needy, conducted funerals daily, led worship in the face of great adversity. That year he also wrote a grace for his family to say before meals. "Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices. Who wondrous things has done, in whom God's world rejoices. Who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way. With countless gifts of love, AND STILL is ours today." Today it is hymn #457 in our Book of Praise. It is an affirmation of faith...a statement of belief...that God blesses us with wondrous things through countless gifts of love. A belief that could center his family daily during the adversity of the plague. The second part of that grace (that forms the second verse of our hymn) is a prayer...let us look at that verse through the lens of pandemic—then and now. It is a prayer of intercession. "O may this bounteous God, through all our life be near us. With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us. And keep us all with grace, and guide us when perplexed. And free us from all ills, in this world and the next." Rooted in his beliefs expressed in the first verse, Rinckart prays in the second, "God, be near us, grant us peace, grant us grace, help us in perplexity, keep us safe from illness." He could make this intercession before God in this prayer because of the certainty of his belief expressed in the first verse. Our beliefs in God can hold us and comfort us in adversity. In fact, our belief **is** that in adversity God can hold us and comfort us.

But holding that belief with conviction can be hard. It is easy to be uncertain about God being that present, that helpful. And I think it can be even more true when we are faced with uncertainty in the midst of adversity. Think about social distancing as an example of living with uncertainty. We are to do it because we can be uncertain whether we have the virus or the person next to us has the virus. Uncertainty has shifted what we think about others...or worry about others. Our rapidly changing situation also prompts uncertainty, because we don't know what tomorrow will bring. Uncertainty contributes significantly to the anxiety people feel these days. And that uncertainty can roll into our faith and call our trust in God into question.

In the 1990's I had the great privilege to get to know one special member of the congregation. Ben served in the trenches of Flanders during WW1. When I knew him he was in his 90's. On my very first visit I asked him what his war experience was like. And upon asking that question, his wife of 62 years got up and left the room, saying "I've heard all these stories before." What stood out from his stories was how they lived daily with uncertainty, and I asked him about that. He told me that at night he would wonder if this would be the night the Germans would pour over into his trench and take his life while he slept. Every day when he awoke, he wondered if this would be the day they would be ordered to go into harm's way, to cross No Man's Land, to take the enemy trenches. When the smoke of artillery fire drifted across the land, he wondered if the

chlorine gas was coming. Every day was a day of uncertainty. “How did you get through it?” I asked. “What sustained you?” He said, “God.” It became his daily practice to repeat from memory the words of the 46th psalm. In the midst of the expressions of tumult in the psalm, there is this description of God’s heaven “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 this city; it shall not be moved” (vs. 4,5). In the midst of the uncertainty of his daily life, remembering and repeating this psalm helped him maintain the second aspect of faith: trust. Trust is the assurance that what is believed is true. Psalm 46 ends with the words, “The Lord of hosts is with us.” Trust helps us believe this is indeed true, and trust helps us lean into God in the midst of uncertainty.

Which brings us to the final encouragement of this psalm. This encouragement forms the bookends to the psalm, in its opening and closing verses. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble....The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.” Because God is powerful, and gracious, and helpful, and trustworthy, we can turn to God as a refuge in adversity. Even, the psalmist says, in great cataclysmic adversity. How do you do that? How do you go to God as a refuge? The psalmist gives one direction, verse 10: “Be still, and know that I am God.” The times that we face naturally...and easily lead to worry. So much so that our thinking can become preoccupied with worries. And here is the encouragement of the psalm: be still. Be still. Put the worry on hold. Calm yourself. Then, know God. Bring to your thinking the remembrance that God is with you. God is there. The God of grace and love surrounds you, cares for you, loves you. Lean into that grace and love. Find refuge in it. Other ways to do this is simply to pray. Psalm 55 encourages us, “Cast your burden upon the Lord and God will sustain you” (Psalm 55:22). Indeed, meditating on the psalms is a great way to do this as well. Many of the psalms are prayers of anxious people. Psalm 42 is a great prayer of one who was anxious about God not answering his prayer!

Those prayers can be answered in many ways. Sometimes you and I are the answer. John Weir Foote was an answer to prayer on the beach at Dieppe, the ill-fated day that Canadian troops faced the uncertainty of landing in German-occupied France. John Weir Foote—a 38 year old Presbyterian chaplain—landed with the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry. He helped establish the regiment’s medical aid post in a depression in the beach...a shallow depression that only provided cover if the men were laying down. Over the next 8 hours Rev. Foote ministered to the wounded, said prayers for the dying, and made countless forays onto the bullet strafed beach to carry the wounded back to the meagre refuge of the gully. He refused several opportunities to join the retreating forces, as his chief concern was the care and evacuation of the wounded. In the end he also refused his final opportunity to leave, choosing instead to join those who would not be escaping – those who would be spending the next 3 years in prison camp. John Weir Foote – a Presbyterian minister – is the only Canadian military chaplain to ever be awarded the Victoria Cross. The psalm says, “God will help when the morning dawns” (vs. 5). God provides that refuge and strength, at times, through people. Through us.

The apostle Paul wrote, “Faith, hope and love abide.” These three form a core to our faith. In these days of uncertainty and worry, remember your faith. Remember the

encouragement of Psalm 46. Believe and trust that “the Lord of Hosts is with us.” Because God is.

Psalm 46

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 its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

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 not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.

“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.