

Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church

"Keep Calm and Carry On"

Scripture: Psalm 46, Mark 4:35-42

Hymns: How firm a foundation 685 (1-3, 5), Love knocks and waits (insert), Be still and know that I am God 64, A mighty fortress is our God 315

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Rev. Steve Filyk

"Shortly after the sirens wailed
 you could hear the Germans grinding overhead.
 In my room, with its black curtains drawn across the windows,
 you could feel the shake from the guns.

You could hear the boom, crump, crump, crump,
 of heavy bombs at their work of tearing buildings apart.
 They were not too far away.

Half an hour after the firing started
 I gathered a couple of friends and went to a high, darkened balcony
 that gave us a view of a third
 of the entire circle of London...

You have all seen big fires,
 but I doubt if you have ever
 seen the whole horizon of a city
 lined with great fires - scores of them, perhaps hundreds...

About every two minutes a new wave of planes would be over.
 The motors seemed to grind rather than roar,
 and to have an angry pulsation,
 like a bee buzzing in blind fury...

Into the dark shadowed spaces below us...
 whole batches of incendiary bombs fell.
 We saw two dozen go off in two seconds.

They flashed terrifically,
 then quickly simmered down to pin points of dazzling white,
 burning ferociously.

These white pin points would go out one by one,
 as the unseen heroes of the moment smothered them with sand.
 But also, while we watched, other pin points would burn on,
 and soon a yellow flame would leap up
 from the white center.
 They had done their work –
 another building was on fire..."ⁱ

This description of a night raid
 During the London Blitz
 was written by war correspondent Ernie Pyle.

From his perch he expresses a dark fascination
 With all that he saw around him.
 We can imagine it was quite different for those on the ground:
 Fighting the fires, looking for loved ones,
 Racing for shelter.

We can imagine their desperation
 On that horrific evening.

And we can imagine that desperation deepening
 As the blitz continued,
 At one point pounding London
 For 57 consecutive nights."ⁱⁱ

How do we keep calm when the storm is raging around us?
 When we are stuck in the middle of it?
 How do we keep calm and carry on?

Today we turn to a familiar psalm
 That is often read in times of crisis.

Like psalm 23 it is a song that invites us to look to God for confidence.
 And yet unlike the shepherd's psalm it is a communal song
 Addressing not just individual troubles,
 But problems afflicting churches, communities, nations.

Please turn with me to Psalm 46.
 It is found on page 517 of your pew Bible.

Looking at the structure, the psalm is divided into three sections.

You can see that italicised word 'Selah',
Probably a musical notation,
At the end of verse 3 and 7
And the end of the psalm.

Between the sections

And within the sections
There are notable, even jarring contrasts
As the psalmist moves in counterpoint between
Images of chaos and peace.ⁱⁱⁱ

Let's look at the verses a little more closely
Beginning with the first section.

The psalmist begins not with a call to worship

But a declaration of trust in God:
"God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble."^{iv}

This statement of confidence, is unqualified,
not limited to sunny days.

This confidence in God is for when the world
Is collapsing, literally falling apart:

"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."

it's pretty clear to us

Who are living in the Cascadia subduction zone
That what the psalmist is an earthquake.

But how are we to understand that talk

About 'mountains shaking in the heart of the sea'?

This is when referring to commentators is helpful.

Walter Brueggemann notes that:

"In the ancient Near East, the mountains "in the heart of the sea"
are the pillars of the earth that also hold the sky in place.

[And so] The thought of those mountains tottering
suggests that the earth is about to collapse
and the sky about to fall."^v

Sounds pretty grim.

And yet even in that terrible situation
The psalmist has confidence and trust.
God is not an escape,
but God is a refuge and a help.

Our second section beginning at verse 4

Suddenly switches images.
Instead of raging waters
We encounter a tame river
Flowing through the city of Jerusalem.

"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."^{vi}

If you've ever been to Israel you'll find this a puzzling assertion.

While in Jerusalem I had the chance

To see Hezekiah's tunnel—
The underground water channel
That was cut to bring water from the Gihon springs
Right into the city.

But there is no literal river or stream

That makes that city glad.

Once again the psalmist is employing poetic imagery.

In the ancient Near East, "Images of sacred places of divine presence
often [picture] rivers running through them...
The streams of water flow from the divine presence

and bring nourishment and hope to the
community."^{vii}

The psalmist is asserting

That just as God is a refuge amidst chaos,
God can offers an oasis for the community.
The seas may be surging
And the nations may be tottering as well.

Yet under God's rule and protection

A community is nurtured with new life and strength.

Our final section, beginning at verse 8,

offers what I think is the strongest praise
Of our creator and savior.

"He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;

he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire."^{viii}

This past Canada day I had my first opportunity

To see the guns of my artillery unit in actions.
It was an incredible experience.

Those nearby were encouraged to wear-ear plugs.

Even though the guns were firing blanks
You could feel the impact on your chest.

Tools of war are powerful and devastating.

And yet what the psalmist proclaims
Is that God will "ban war from pole to pole,
[breaking these] weapons across his knee."^{ix}

Not only does God provide a refuge.

Not only does God create an oasis,
But God "exercise[s] his unquestioned power
over both cosmic and political forces,
to such an extent that he obliterates war itself
and unbuilds the technology of
combat."^x

Even the A-bomb itself is no match for God,
God is the beginning and end of all things.

So what is our response to this

Reminder of God's ability to protect us
To nurture us,
And to overcome all that threaten us.

We are called to 'be still'.

One commentator notes that "most usages of this phrase
are pulled outside the context of the psalm
and refer to stillness in the vein of relaxing or quiet
meditation.

[But that this is] not the kind of stillness to which this psalm refers.

The phrase is more like the sound of a parent

sharply correcting her or his fidgeting child: "Be still!"^{xi}

Stop anxiously fiddling.

Stop endlessly worrying.
Trust in God's promises.
Keep calm and carry on!

When we recognise God's powerful presence

and determine to make God our shelter,
we discover that we have new peace within us,
and the resources from which to bless those around us.

Listen to another more recent story,

from March 11, 2011.

"I was on my bicycle, with my daughter, Eryka,

in her seat on the back,
returning home from [kindergarten].

Eryka is six now,

so if she shifts her weight just slightly,
it can throw me off balance.

I wondered what she was doing behind me.
 Then I realized it wasn't her
 but the ground itself that was causing us to wobble!

I stopped, snatched her off the bike
 and ran to a nearby parking lot, a
 way from houses and power lines.

Instinctively, I tucked her under me as we crouched down
 and cried out to Jesus. "O Lord, please make it stop!"
 Five minutes felt like an eternity.

My husband, David, had run an errand in Tokyo
 and, at the time of the earthquake,
 was... very near the Christian school
 that our older two children attend.

He went to Josiah and Eryn immediately,
 and after we finally got in touch with each other,
 I went to pick them all up by car.

Later, we were glad to be safe at home
 but were horrified as we watched television coverage of the tsunami
 destroying the area where we had spent our summer vacation.

Then an oil refinery burned.
 The next day a nuclear reactor exploded,
 which was only the beginning of trouble.

The aftershocks, also, were frequent and frightening,
 more severe than other earthquakes we'd experienced
 in our 12 years as international workers in Japan.

After a very fitful night,
 I awoke on Saturday morning with Psalm 46
 coursing through my whole being:

God is our refuge and strength—
 even if the mountains fall into the heart of the sea!

This psalm became our comfort and theme
 in the following intense days.
 We carefully monitored information
 and prayed to determine what we should do
 for our family.

We felt at peace about staying put,
 at least for the time being.

Plans changed and activities were cancelled,
 but when our gospel choirs met again,
 the members were ready to be together,
 offer thanks to God and sing their hearts out.

As we were cleaning up after a session,
 Mari approached me quietly.

"Your friends and family are worried about you, aren't they?" she asked,
 her eyes searching mine.
 Eye contact is rare in this culture.

"Yes, of course, they are.
 We get tons of e-mail messages.
 But they are praying for us—and for Japan."

"Don't you want to go back?
 Aren't you afraid?"

I gazed and smiled at this sweet, young mother
 who makes a huge effort to be part of our gospel choir.
 Smiles are rare as well.

"Well, yes, we all feel afraid, don't we?" I admitted.
 "But we are listening to the news
 and we get updates from our embassy.
 Right now, we don't feel we need to leave.
 We want to keep living here."

Jesus loves the Japanese people.
 I love the Japanese people more than before!
 We want to be with you now, to go through this together.”

I touched her arm.
 Touch is rare.

ⁱ “The London Blitz, 1940” www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/blitz.htm reporting account from Pyle Ernie, Ernie Pyle in England (1941), Reprinted in Commager, Henry Steele, *The Story of the Second World War* (1945); Johnson, David, *The London Blitz : The City Ablaze*, December 29, 1940 (1981).

ⁱⁱ “The Blitz” *Wikipedia*

ⁱⁱⁱ See Ruthanna Hooke “Psalm 46, Pastoral Perspective” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*.

^{iv} Psalm 46:1 NRSV

She started to cry.
 My eyes filled, too.
 Tears are rarer still.

God is our refuge and strength.
 Even as the storms rage about
 God will provide for us.
 God will give us strength for ourselves
 And extra calm to share.

^v Walter Brueggemann & William H. Bellinger, Jr. *Psalms* 217

^{vi} Psalm 46:4-5 NRSV

^{vii} Walter Brueggemann & William H. Bellinger, Jr. *Psalms* 217

^{viii} Psalm 46:9 NRSV

^{ix} Psalm 46:9 MSG

^x Joel M. LeMon “Psalm 46” *Psalms for Preaching and Worship* 160

^{xi} Susan K. Olson “Psalm 46, Homiletical perspective” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*.