

THE CITY OF GOD
by Dr. Heather Weir

PSALM 46

I don't know about you, but it's been a bit of a week. Maybe I should make that, it's been a bit of a month. Maybe even a year. On Friday, many of you were here as we remembered the life of Barb Boyt. Tomorrow is the service for Pastor Elaine's father, Roy. We've experienced a lot of loss this year, we are all grieving these losses in different ways.

A couple of weeks ago, when I asked Elaine if I should put a sermon in my back pocket to have ready as needed, she said yes. I'd been thinking about the phrase in Psalm 46 "there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." This phrase seems to possibly point toward something for us in our rebuilding time at Walmer. This means I picked this Psalm, without really thinking about the season of loss we are in. But in the Psalm we are reminded that God is our Refuge and Strength. I hope this also speaks in our loss as well as potentially speaking into our journey into the future.

Let's look together at Psalm 46. (I am reading from the NRSV, but will refer to other translations through the morning.)

¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

(Selah)

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar,
the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice,
the earth melts.

⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

(Selah)

⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;

he breaks the bow,
and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth."

¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

(Selah)

Psalm 46 is tightly structured poem. The psalmist used a variety of literary devices in structuring this song, including metaphor, alliteration, and parallelism. Repeated words connect different parts of the poem. Poetry can be difficult to read – but poems often reward close attention. The first part of this sermon is a close reading of this poem that points out the poem’s structure and some of the literary devices used.

This Psalm has three sections, separated from one another by the word ‘Selah’ a term which is a technical, probably a musical term that occurs in many Psalms. There are many suggestions as to its meaning, but we just don’t know for sure at this point what it means. The three sections are connected by two things:

The first connector is the repeated use of the word ‘earth’, once in each of the first two sections, verse 2, “though the earth should change” and in verse 6, “the earth melts”. In the third section “earth” is repeated in verses 8, 9, and 10, which is all the verses of the third section of the Psalm.

The second connector is the repeated theme of God’s protection and presence with his people. The first section, verses 1-3, begins with a statement of God’s protection and presence; the second and third sections end with a repeated refrain which reiterates this theme: “The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

This connecting word – Earth – and connecting idea – God’s protection -- suggest that a theme of this psalm might be protection on earth. Let’s see if this hypothesis stands up as we continue.

Verses 1-3 make up the first section of the Psalm:

¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
² Therefore we will not fear,
 though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³ though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

(Selah)

Hebrew poetry uses a literary device called parallelism – succeeding lines and half lines of a poem repeat and build on words and ideas. In the first verse, ‘a very present help in trouble’ expands what the psalmist meant by calling God ‘our refuge and strength’. Verses 2 and 3 are closely linked by the repeated shaking and trembling of the mountains, and the roaring and tumult of the sea.

The sea is often a metaphor for chaos in scripture. This section of the Psalm asserts that God protects his people from the chaos of natural catastrophes and reminds us that God’s good created order emerged from chaos. God, who created the earth, is our refuge and strength through the trouble of earth-shaking events, which seem out of control.

Verses 4-7 make up the second section of this psalm:

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
² Therefore we will not fear,
 though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³ though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

(Selah)

In these verses, a city with a river, nations, and kingdoms are introduced. In verse 5, God helps the city, just as God is our help in verse 1. Though the earth and mountains moved in the first section, God’s city does not move. The nations and kingdoms, however, are a different story. The kingdoms totter; the verb used here is the same one used of the mountains in verse two and can also be translated ‘slide.’ The mountains slide into the heart of the sea: the kingdoms slide.

This section of the psalm portrays God as the protector of his people in international or national crises. Though nations are in an uproar, and kingdoms slide, the Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Verses 8-11 make up the third and final section of the Psalm:

- ⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord;
 see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
 he breaks the bow,
 and shatters the spear;
 he burns the shields with fire.
¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!
 I am exalted among the nations,
 I am exalted in the earth."
¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our refuge.

(Selah)

These verses combine the idea of God’s protection in the context of both natural and national crises. God does deeds inspiring awe – wonders – or desolations – on the earth, and causes wars to cease. God is exalted both among the nations and in the earth. Notice that God does not fight wars, but makes wars cease. He does not use the weapons of war, but destroys them.

Verse 10, “Be still and know that I am God” is often used as a call to meditation or worship, and we tend to forget the imagery of war that surrounds the verse. “Be still” are the words of the Lord of Hosts to those that oppose him – stop! Don’t even try to fight me, know that I am God. At the same time, these words can be heard by those who seek the protection of the God of Jacob: “Relax! Know that I am God, your refuge.”

How do these three sections of the Psalm fit together?

First, it could be argued that the first section of this psalm is oriented toward the past – it focuses on creation, and reminds us that God created the world and, as creator, is in control of the seas, and the chaos they represent. The second part of the psalm introduces a city, kingdoms, and nations. This reminds us that God controls history – what happens in this world from day to day in the present. The third part of the psalm looks to the future – when wars will cease, when God will be exalted over the nations and over the earth. This progress from past to present to future gives this psalm an end times or eschatological structure.

The second way the sections fit together is the use of a repeated refrain. The second and third sections of this psalm conclude with this refrain: The Lord of Hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge.”

Let’s unpack that refrain for a moment. The Lord of Hosts means the Lord of Armies. A “host of heaven” means all the angels of Heaven, the armies of heaven. In the Message, Eugene Peterson translates “YHWH Sabaoth” as God-of-the-Angel-Armies. Note that The Lord of Armies is not just the Lord of the Angel Armies, but the Lord of all earthly armies as well. This name for God implies ultimate power and control over all armies, and is found in the Hebrew Bible 285 times, mostly in the prophets.

In the refrain in Psalm 46, ‘the Lord of Hosts’ is paralleled with ‘the God of Jacob’. The phrase “God of Jacob” is only found 16 times in the Old Testament – not counting the times it is found in the cluster “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”. It is primarily found in the Psalms, in the context of God as protector of his people. Jacob had two visions of God: one when he was traveling alone from his parent’s home in the land of promise to his relatives in Syria, the other on his return journey with his large household. In the first vision, Jacob saw a ladder between heaven and earth with angels going up and down the ladder. In the vision, God told Jacob he would protect him as he traveled. In Jacob’s second encounter with God, he wrestled with a stranger all night. Finally, the stranger blessed him at dawn and changed his name to Israel – the one who wrestles with God.

In the Message, Eugene Peterson associates this second encounter with the phrase ‘the God of Jacob’, translating Elohe Yacob as “Jacob-wrestling-God.” Because “God of Jacob” is paralled with the Lord of Hosts, I associate Jacob’s vision of the ladder and angels and the promise of protection with “God of Jacob.” God’s protection of Jacob, however, is evident throughout his story. The Lord of Hosts is the God of Jacob, the God who protected Jacob, and who wrestled with Jacob is present with God’s people, and is a refuge for them.

Fitting together the pieces of this poem, one message for us today is that in the face of natural or national chaos, in the past, present, or in the future, the “God of the Angel Armies is with us; our refuge is the God of Jacob.”

What about the end-times direction of the structure of the poem? And what about the city and the river in verse 4, the unshakeable city with a river whose streams make the city of God glad? How does that fit in with all the chaos and disaster and protection?

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

What is this river? And, What and where is the city of God?

The first thing to notice about the river in the city in verse 4 is that this water brings rejoicing to the city, which is a contrast to the chaos and destruction of the water of the sea in the first section of the Psalm. Instead of chaos, mountains crumbling, tidal waves, the city’s river brings joy, and the city is unmoved. God lives there. The waters of the city’s river bring life. In Psalm 65 we also read about life-giving waters – streams that water the ground so that crops flourish and food is provided for people and animals. The river in the city, the river that brings joy, is water that brings life.

Second, because the city is where God lives, when this psalm was written everyone would have understood the city to be Jerusalem. “Which river?” you may be asking, “Which river did the psalmist mean? Which river in Jerusalem brought gladness to the city?” It has been suggested that an actual river might not be the best understanding of the Psalm, rather the river was a metaphor for God’s presence in the city, which was the holy habitation of the Most High.

This idea of the river referring to the presence of God is reinforced because the Psalm has a future direction implied in its structure. The future redeemed city described in Ezekiel has a river flowing out of the temple, the place where God lived, the building that was the holy habitation of the Most High.

In Ezekiel 47 we read that the prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of a new temple in a city on a high mountain. He was given a guided tour of this new temple by “a man whose appearance shone like bronze.” These verses describe the river the prophet saw flowing from the temple.

“Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led

me around to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

“Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, ‘Mortal, have you seen this?’

“Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees to one side and on the other. He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. ... On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

And from Revelation 22, hear the vision of John:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

The vision of our future is of a redeemed city, a city with a river flowing with the water of life.

I’m still working on what it means for us, living in the city of Toronto, that the Christian vision of the last times is urban – of a redeemed city with God in her midst. Greg Smith helpfully writes “To some extent the welfare of any city is connected with the willingness of God’s people to live there and follow the pattern of incarnation and service which Jesus showed. In one sense Christians should be pilgrims like Abraham with no abiding city, stressing instead their citizenship of heaven. Yet like the exiles in Babylon they are called to settle down and work for the welfare (shalom) of their cities as instructed by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29:4-7). For us today this involves both a verbal witness to Jesus Christ, and a life of full community service, social action and political passion for justice and truth.” Here at Walmer, we are working on figuring out what God is calling us to as we do the work of rebuilding our church. How do we work for the welfare of our city so that in some way the water of life, the river that brings joy begins to flow in Toronto?

I encourage you this week to have at least one conversation with someone about the specific ways our congregation is being called to bring shalom to our city. I don’t think we are being called to change the whole city, but I think God has something in mind for us as we look for

guidance for our future here at Walmer and Lowther. What does it mean to be Jesus here? How do we help others to find their refuge and strength in God? How can God's presence flow from us so that our neighbourhood flourishes?