

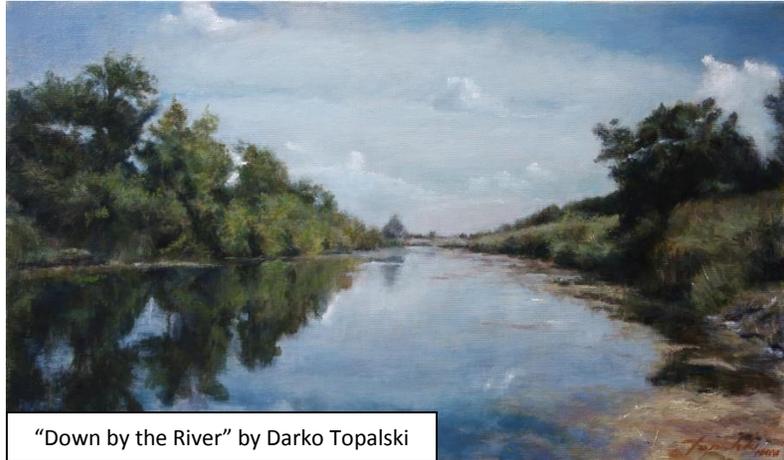
August 19, 2018
Series: Summer in the Psalms

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Mark 8: 31-35
Psalm 46

Two Sundays

*God is our refuge and strength, a
very present help in trouble. –*
Psalm 46:1



Bill slept in on Sunday; 7:45 was late for him. The other six days of the week his alarm rang at six. Most days he showered, dressed, kissed Claudia and kids goodbye at the breakfast table and drove the 15 minutes to the office. On Sundays he slept late. He read the paper, made pancakes for the girls, and got everyone in the car by 9:15. Sometimes it was 9:20, but that didn't matter, the church was only 10 minutes away. Sunday school for everybody, then worship. They were usually always home by 12:45, except when it was Bill's turn to count the offering. Either way, lunch was a sit down thing that Claudia had mostly prepared the day before. Afterwards the girls played outside with the rest of the neighborhood kids until the streetlights came on. The year was 1968.

On another Sunday morning, in a different part of America (though it really doesn't matter where) Jason rolled over and glanced at the clock: 7:45. Usually he was up by 6 for the hour-long commute to the city. He'd better get going; everyone needed to be in the car by 8:15. Jason looked forward to Sundays and a relaxed breakfast with Jen and the kids, but that wasn't going to happen today. Get there late and you don't play; the coach had made that clear. Wonder if travel ball is worth it? Teddy showed real promise; they were hoping for a scholarship. Jen and the older kids were going along today. That was good. Usually Caroline had the algebra tutor on Sunday mornings and Matt had Confirmation, but this was a week off, so no worries there. Jason missed church. Worshiping with Jen and the kids made him feel grounded. Maybe they'd have the chance to go together for Easter. "Remind the kids to take their backpacks," he told himself, "they're going to have to finish their homework the in the car. That tournament's going to last until dark". The year? 2018.

Bill and Claudia are my parents. Jason and Jennifer are not my kids. If they were, and I used them in a sermon, I'd have to pay them. That's been the rule since they were small. But my own kids' lives are not that different. They have a lot on their plates – lots of pressure from work, childcare, school, sports, not to mention care of their aging parents. It piles up. So much is uncertain. Making sure kids get into a good college is the goal, but a college education is no longer a guarantee of financial security. They'll need to move 3-5 times during their working lives. Extended families are often separated by hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles.

And on Sundays? Bill was an usher who set up chairs for the overflow crowds at church. In the 1960's new congregations were popping up everywhere. Fifty years later 4,000 churches in the U.S. close their doors every year. Sunday is just as much a day for shopping and recreation as it is for family gatherings, worship, and Christian education. Congregations mourn the empty seats in the sanctuary, and cast around for someone to blame. We tell ourselves if everyone would just try harder, do the old things better, maybe we could return to the old days. But can we? Churches in Asia, Africa, Central and South America are bursting at the seams, but in the West, with very few exceptions, churches are declining in membership and participation -- at a rapid rate.

What will the future be for us, and for our children? I feel that question down to my bones. I have a granddaughter (you know) and she is perfect! I want all this for her; I want it for the children who gather on these steps every week. Will there be a church for them when they reach my advanced age? I worry about that, and you do too. And as Princeton Seminary's president, Craig Barnes noted, "The church is never less attractive than when it dresses in anxiety."¹

So let's see what kind of word the scripture has for us. Listen again to 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.*

*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;
God speaks, the earth melts.
The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

*Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations God has brought on the earth.
The Lord makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
God breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
and 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.*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Do you remember the story about the two boys whose mother asked them to chase a chicken snake out of the hen house? They looked in the hen house; they looked everywhere for the snake, but couldn't find it. The more they looked the more anxious they became, until finally, when they did find it, they nearly killed each other running out of the hen house.

"Don't you know that the chicken snake won't hurt you?" their mother asked.
"We know," one of the boys answered, "but there are some things that'll scare you so bad you'll hurt yourself."

Most of us have been there, haven't we? Most of us are that afraid of something. *The psalmist sings: God is our refuge and strength/a very present help in trouble/Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change.* Except for God, change is the only constant. Change is inevitable. Besides, I don't want to go back to the 1960's. Racism, sexism, segregation, homophobia. The horrible news from Pennsylvania this week, that over 1,000 children may have been abused by 300 or more priests, is staggering, heartbreaking, and unacceptable...ever. Here at Woods, Youth Ministry volunteers are committed to the growth and nurture of our young people...they are given good support and training to that end. This is a good time to remind you that Woods has a strict Child Protection Policy designed to provide layers of safeguards for our children and youth. If you'd like to read the policy, there are copies in the office and at the Welcome Center.

I have no desire to return to the days when children, or anyone else with little power, can be victimized. That period of time, from the 1950's to the 1990's, when Bill was setting up chairs in the back of the church, when the Mainline Protestant Church was in its heyday, that was only a tiny moment in the 2000 year history of the Christian faith. Most of those 2000 years were not easy. They were filled with turmoil and trouble— but we're still here. The church is still here.

The only possible explanation for the church's survival is that God wants us to be here. God means to use the Church, capital "C", all the churches, to continue Christ's mission of bringing his message of life and hope to the world. We find our purpose here, in this fellowship. This church, and all others like it will change, must change. But that doesn't mean God is not in it. Remember: throughout history, every single time the Church has landed in the ditch, Christ has come along, pulled us out, and invited us again to lose our lives in order to find them.ⁱⁱ

We are nothing but a bunch of imperfect people, on a mission to bring hope to the world.

Let me give you an example from real life. This is a true story.

My phone rang at 2:00AM on a Sunday. I heard the voice of a beloved church member, a strong and good man, an elder of the church where I was joyfully serving as youth pastor. It's one of the loveliest ministry assignments I've ever had, except right then. My friend's voice was shaking. He said,
"There's been an accident. Sarah and her boyfriend ...on their way home from a movie. A drunk driver hit them."

I rushed to the hospital and found two unconscious teens, two families, clinging to each other as their children clung to life. We gathered in the chapel and got down on our knees and begged God for deliverance. We prayed the 46th psalm: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” Right then it sounded like a faraway dream.

That Sunday, and the next day, and for the next several months, we continued to pray as the kids recovered -- through surgeries and rehab, physical therapy and nearly missed graduations, two families experienced the worst life can throw at you.

More than once, both families said, “You know, in times like this, you find out what matters.” And it’s true. Here were two families experiencing the same anguished, earth-shaking experience, but there was a difference between these two families – and it was a big one. One of the families had a church, and the other didn’t.

Now don’t get me wrong. Stephen’s family are good people, they are believers. But at the time of the accident, they didn’t have a family of faith. And that made a huge difference. There were all kinds of good reasons: they had recently moved to the community. Their Sundays were like Jen and Jason’s (the young couple I mentioned earlier) they were busy, busy, busy. Then the accident happened, and it shook them to the core. Without a church they had no refuge and little strength, no “very present help in time of trouble.”

Of course, our church, Sarah’s church, responded; they rallied around Stephen’s family; they brought meals and offered childcare and lots and lots of prayers. But I have to be honest, it wasn’t the same, because the life-sustaining relationship that Sarah’s family has with God and their church takes years to build. You just can’t create it in a crisis.

I’m happy to say that both teens recovered; they’re adults now, each has a set of teenagers of their own. Not together, they married different people. I learned so much from them, so much that I still carry in my heart.

I learned that what we are doing here in Christ’s name matters, it really does; and not just with regard to eternal life, it matters for the here and now. Jesus Christ *is our very present help in times of trouble*, so we need not fear. Even when the earth shakes beneath us and everything that we thought we could count on comes apart, *God is in the midst of us, and we shall not be moved*.

The problem is everyone doesn’t know that – many, many of the people aren’t standing on that rock solid foundation. It’s not their fault; they’re not here because no one has invited them.

So please, if you don’t have a church home today, consider this your invitation. Join us. Come along with us on this amazing journey as we worship and serve Jesus Christ in this place. Church is where you need to be. This is the place where we constantly remind ourselves who we are and whose we are. We hold each other up through hard times, and we multiply joys! Church is the place where we have the opportunity to pour out our love on behalf of others, to make a real and lasting impact on the world, as we share the living hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. Church is where you need to be.

If you are a regular at Woods, my guess is that those are some of the things that bring you back week after week. But what if you didn't know about all that? What if no one had ever asked you? We say in our mission statement that we are "Welcoming all to grow and serve in Christ." But are we inviting all?

We don't want to be intrusive. Most Presbyterians would rather die than act like evangelicals. Here's the truth. Neighbors like Stephen and his family, friends like Jen and Jason, need what we have to share. Ask at the wrong time and you're going to get shot down. That's painful, but the passage that Tom/Tim read for us says that we must be willing to take risks, make sacrifices for the sake of Jesus Christ, for the sake of those he loves.

Claudia and Bill, the young couple in the 1960's, my parents--Bill died 18 years ago. After 40 years of marriage, Claudia was lost. Struggling, she decided to move nearer her daughters, my sisters, who live only 10 miles apart. So she pulled up stakes and moved across the country, to a neighborhood where she knew not one living soul. As the movers were carrying her furniture into the new house, a neighbor came over, introduced herself, and invited Claudia to church on Sunday, even offered to pick her up. She accepted her neighbor's invitation -- and it wasn't even a Presbyterian church! Since then she has barely missed a Sunday. That neighbor's small kindness threw Claudia a lifeline, the sure and certain hope of God's presence in her life, and an opportunity to share the love God gave her, with all her heart, mind, soul and strength. To the glory of God. Amen.

ⁱ M. Craig Barnes, "The post-anxiety church" *Christian Century*, January 29, 2016

ⁱⁱ *ibid*