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Our Bible in a Bible: Wish You Were Here

Psalm 46: 1-2

Most of us vacation as an opportunity to find refreshment and renewal from the demands of jobs, family, and life in general. My family has just returned from vacation. We did not need a vacation, we were not worn down by life or overwhelmed by challenges. We did not need an escape, but we are much blessed and took an early "spring break" and it was delightful.

However, there are times in life that are so difficult that we yearn for a vacation, a break from reality. I can imagine that some of us gathered here today would love a "vacation" from some challenge in life that is painful or burdensome. It may be a vacation from an illness or the weight of grief. It may be a needed break from a dispute in a relationship or the stress of a career. It may be a vacation from a daily routine that has grown empty over time. It may be a break from worry about a loved one or it might be a vacation from the demands of the very lifestyle we have created.

"Wish you were here." They are words that can often be found on postcards from exotic places. However, when we hear those words this morning, I have a different thought in mind. "Wish you were here," God's postcard of love to you and to me. Imagine God writing to us, wish you were in a place where life is less painful, where resentments are set aside, where wounds are healed. Wish you are confident of God's care for you on the good days and the bad. Wish you were comfortable in sharing the love of God with others. Wish you could look in the mirror and see the marvelous work of art that God sees. Wish you would shape your days to reflect the light of Christ's love. Wish you were here - not a calling to a particular place on the map, but rather a spiritual place of connection with the divine. A place within heart and soul that is alive and well no matter what our external circumstances. A place where love overwhelms fear, hope outweighs despair and grace abounds. "Wish you were here" - a message from God to each one of us this morning. Wish you were here - a place in our soul that does not require travel on planes, trains or automobiles. Wish you were here - an invitation that points to the direction of our Lenten journey. Here, deep within - a holy place of God.

Dr. Wantz has been exploring the Bible within the Bible during this season of Lent. The Bible is the best book ever written. It has intrigue and scandal. It offers comfort and challenge. In places it is as suspenseful as a murder mystery. In other places it is the narrative of a great novel. In the book of Ecclesiastes it has one sensual passage after another. You name it, the Bible has it. What makes it the greatest book ever written for me is that it is also sacred. It is the foundation for a life of faith and it is informative not only for life choices, but also for soulful living. The Bible is the vehicle that can help

transform us to the very people God envisions us to become. To that end, the very nature of God is declared in Psalm 46.

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear...

This sentence is ever true, completely reliable, fact beyond a shadow of a doubt and at the heart of our faith relationship with the Divine. Yet, try as we might, humans are just not convinced. I know that I have not been convinced. It is the "Therefore we will not fear" part of the passage that brings me doubt. I have been fearful in my life. It started early in life when I was afraid of monsters lurking under my bed or in the closet at bedtime. It grew to a nagging worry that something terrible might happen to my parents and I would be left with my older brothers. To this day, that still gives me chills. When I grew to be a teenager, I had concerns about never finding a meaningful career or a life partner. I spent many of my younger days fretting about things that I had little to no control over or things that never came to pass. What a tremendous waste of energy.

God is our refuge and strength. God is constant. God is ever ready and always willing to be with us in the midst of life. Because of that truth, we need not fear. Foundational to our understanding of God is not that our faith will shield us from all that is wrong in the world, but that our faith will guide us through the challenges of this world.

I was so moved by a story Dr. Wantz told two weeks ago about a group of prisoners of war in WWII who created a bible from their collective memory and wrote verses and bible stories on dried palm leaves that they wove together to create pages. That powerful story reminded me of one of the churches I served early in ministry that had three men who were prisoners of war in three different conflicts. The one thing they shared in common was how important the scriptures they learned as children were when they were in prison camps. All of them relied on their faith and quite specifically on their memory of scripture to get them through the horrible experience of prison camp. Their knowledge of scripture helped to keep them sane in the worst of circumstances. Each of these men found comfort and the break from the reality that surrounded them by remembering scripture that God is always present and the source of strength.

It is the understanding of God as refuge and strength that enables people of faith to withstand the harsh storms of this life. It is a commitment to the love of God that allows one to move to that place of faith that is strong enough to endure the most horrific of circumstances. It is in developing "here" with God when life is good that enables us to stand strong in our faith when life is almost unbearable. What we teach our children about God today may very well be their lifeline in the future.

Years ago I read a book about the kidnapping of Terry Waite in Beirut, Lebanon in 1987. The book entitled, *Taken on Trust* tells the story of his 1,763 days as a hostage.

Blindfolded for long periods of time, often in chains and isolated, Waite tells of living in his cell in suffocating heat and freezing cold temperatures. He writes of the agony he endured, both physical and emotional. In one chapter Waite recalls a night of fear with these words, "But shadows tonight have struck more terror to my soul than the substance of ten thousand soldiers...Tears come to my eyes, but I steel myself...whatever happens, my spirit will remain strong. No regrets, hear that? I thump my fist into my palm out of sheer frustration and anger." He goes on to write, "Each day I have walked through the Psalmist's valley. The shadow of death has been around me. Then, for a space, I have caught a glimpse of the warmth of light, and the shadow has receded. Christ in his teaching spoke so simply and yet so profoundly about the essential fundamentals of life. I know that he has taught me to face life as it is and not to be afraid of death. I may die in captivity. I may not see my family and friends again. Whatever happens, I have not been destroyed. My prayers have been puny, but once or twice I have touched the awesome mystery which lies at the heart of the universe, and which I call God. Awesome is the only word I can find to describe what I mean. In Christ I see the light side of God, which gives me strength and hope. His death graphically illustrates the polarity I know in my inner being. By allowing my unconscious to work, I will find healing and strength."

Waite speaks eloquently of the "here" that God envisions for us. This is the place that God desires us to be. A place deep inside where we are mature, forgiving, and faithful even in the midst of our most challenging days and our most threatening realities.

Terry Waite was able to channel his spiritual energy even in the midst of his imprisonment. He prayed twice a day from the Common Book of Prayer that he had with him. He read scripture daily and once a week he held back a little bit of bread from his meager meals to use for a sacred time of communion. He found the "here" with God deep within him that allowed him to not only survive, but to actually grow in this horrible situation. 1,763 days - nearly five very long, painful years. His vacation, his sanity, his hope - the Divine presence within him a place of refuge and strength.

In his book, *There's a Spiritual Solution to Every Problem*, author Wayne Dyer writes about awakening to the Divine presence that is within each one of us. In his chapter entitled, "Stop Giving Energy to the Things You Don't Believe In", Dyer offers suggestions about where we might place our spiritual energy. He suggests that people who we deem to be successful or happy or fully functioning are those who are able to attract into their lives what they would like to have. The successful people have a tendency to do these four things: First, "they express their desires. Successful people have no hesitation to say out loud what it is they would like to manifest into their lives." If they are faced with difficult circumstances, they first express what it is that they want to change or what it is that they wish to embrace. To look beyond what is wrong to envision what would be better, what would be different, what would be best for them.

Secondly, Dyer writes, "They are willing to ask. This involves an awareness that they are not alone, that a divine source is something they are at all times connected to and that this source will provide them with sustenance and answers if they will only ask.

"Personally," says Dyer, "whenever I find myself stuck in a problem area I go to a quiet place, away from all distractions and I ask God to guide me in the direction of a solution. The act of asking is a form of letting go of the ego and accessing that highest spiritual guidance."

Finally he writes, "They have a hardening of will." Dyer says that he refers to this as having a passion for what you would like to attract to your life and resolve your problems. "When successful people harden their will they become immune to outside forces which might attempt to dissuade them from their inner passion. In fact, they actually use the negative external pressures to remind themselves of their commitments."

I would suggest that when we are in trouble, when we are afraid, when life is going directions that bring us no joy or lift of spirit, we tend to put all our energies into the negativity. It is in those very times when life seems to overwhelm us that we wonder if God is even listening to us, if God even cares that we are drowning. Dr. Dyer invites us to direct our energies toward what it is that we would prefer in our lives and commit ourselves to moving our life in that direction. All the while being assured that God is ever present with us.

I do not know the circumstances in your life today. I only know that the human condition often includes pain and suffering. I only know that at some point in our lives we will wonder if we can handle what life has thrown at us. The answer is "Yes." We are a people of faith and find our hope, our courage, our lives are in the hands of God who is ever present, our refuge and strength. Nothing life can throw at us is greater than God's ability to love us through that reality.

"Wish you were Here" is an invitation from God to grow in this season of Lent. No need to travel, no need for palm trees or ocean breezes. Even in the midst of the worst possible circumstances, our God is not only our refuge, but also our strength and always our hope.

Through the sacred writings of our faith, may we all find our way toward the outstretched hands of our ever loving God. We have hope upon hope upon hope as we not only envision what we wish for our life, but then with God's help commit ourselves to bringing what we desire to the life we have been given.

God is our refuge, our strength and ever present. Not a palm tree in sight and yet all the hope we will ever need!