

A Mighty Fortress

Psalm 46

Rev. Dan Schumacher

For Christmas this past year, Emilia gave me a book called *The Mysteries*.

It's a book written by Bill Watterson. And if that name sounds familiar to you for some reason, it's probably because you saw it scribbled at the end of every "Calvin and Hobbes" comic strip you ever read.

"Calvin and Hobbes" was my favorite comic strip growing up, partly because Calvin reminded me so much of my older brother, Kevin. An over-sized imagination, highly intelligent, a love of playing with his food, and absolutely no impulse control – he was my brother brought to life in newsprint.

But in 1995, Watterson stopped penning the comic and largely chose a self-imposed exile, rarely making any public appearances and producing no new work. He removed himself so far from the limelight that fellow comic strip artists started comparing him to Bigfoot, saying that a Bill Watterson sighting was as rare as a Bigfoot sighting.

So imagine my surprise when I came into the office that day, and on my desk was a new book by Bill Watterson, entitled *The Mysteries*.

Now, *Spoiler Alert* – the book is nothing like "Calvin and Hobbes." There's no cute kid carrying around a stuffed tiger getting into mischief. *The Mysteries* is short, only about 400 words in all, and illustrated with haunting black-and-white images.

The story is this: the people of a kingdom are plagued by forces known only as "Mysteries." The king sends out all of his knights to capture one of these "Mysteries." Most of them never return. But when a lone, weary knight finally returns with a Mystery in tow, the people study it and they come away unimpressed. One by one, "the Mysteries" become not so mysterious. And the people of the kingdom gradually come to believe that they have mastered the world and bent it to their will. In fact, they revel in their dominion over The Mysteries.

I won't tell you how it ends, exactly. But let's just suffice it to say that this is a classic Hubris-Will-Be-Your-Downfall story.

And we aren't that different, are we? The moment we think we have mastered this world, have bent it to our will, powers beyond us break loose and remind us how little control we really have.

In January, 2012, six additional students went with one of my seminary classes to South Africa for a three weeks. They had been originally slated to go to Japan a semester earlier. But the spring before they were slated to go, the fourth largest earthquake ever recorded erupted under the ocean on the eastern side of Japan. It lasted six minutes and,

ultimately, sent a wall of water slamming into Japan. Just how big was that wall? It was 135 foot high and traveled at speeds of 435 miles per hour. That wall of water hit with such force, that it traveled 6 miles inland and washed away 100 evacuation sites. It caused a nuclear disaster and killed nearly 20,000 people, injured over 6,000 more, and another 2,500 are still consider “missing.” Needless to say, that class’s trip to Japan was cancelled, and they came with us to South Africa instead.

In 2017, Hurricane Harvey camped over the Houston area and dumped up to 60 inches of water in parts of Texas over four days. We get 15-16 inches each *year*. They got 60 inches in 4 days. And that part of Texas is so flat that water just would not drain off. So the massive flooding inflicted \$125 billion in damage, tying it with Hurricane Katrina for the most costly hurricane on record.

In 2020, Colorado saw its top three largest wildfires ever on record – in a single year! – the largest being the Cameron Peak fire, which burned over 200,000 acres. That one fire required over 1,000 personnel fighting the fire and took 112 days before it was considered “contained.” Not put out; *contained*.

Two weeks ago, a massive landslide in the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea washed away entire villages and buried an estimated 2,000 people alive, who were asleep in their beds when the side of the mountain collapsed underneath them and washed them away.

We sometimes like to think that we’ve mastered the world and bent it to our will, but it has a way of reminding us of our place in the scheme of things, doesn’t it?

The reality is that we are not the first people in history, and we won’t be the last to endure disasters – both natural and human-made.

Because of its imagery of mountains shaking and toppling, some scholars have tried to tie Psalm 46 to an earthquake mentioned elsewhere in scripture that hit Jerusalem during the First Temple era.

But we don’t need to make poetry into a literal, historic event in order to feel it’s effect.

The psalmist imagines a scenario in which an earthquake topples mountains into the sea. And the sea boils and roils and foams at the coast so violently that even the mountains quiver as it swells up its seams. It’s as if the earth, itself, is breaking apart.

I have to imagine that these images feel eerily accurate to anyone who witnessed that wall of water hit Japan and lived to tell about it, or who watched helplessly as that landslide wiped their city off the face of the earth in Papua New Guinea.

But what’s most surprising to me about the psalmist’s words aren’t how eerily accurate they feel when disaster actually erupts, but how all of their power takes a back seat to the power of God.

“God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore, *we will not fear*
though the earth break apart and mountains topple and seas boils up...”

The psalm goes on to describe how God isn't just a refuge from the threat of natural disaster, but also from the “roar” of hostile nations and the “shaking” caused by invading kingdoms.

It's easy to be afraid when the earth shakes, whether that's because of an earthquake or because of the stamping feet of an approaching army. It's easy to fear loud roars, whether that's the roar of the sea or the roar of other nations rising against you.

But the very first word of Psalm 46 isn't disaster and isn't downfall and isn't shaking and it isn't roaring. The very first word of the psalm is: *God*. And if God is the first word, then there is no need to fear — because God is bigger than the earthquakes and the tsunamis and the invading armies. In fact, says the psalm, God will even bring an end to war — will break the bow, will shatter the spear, will burn the shield. There will be no more need for such weapons when there is no more war. What is there to possibly fear when God's got your back?

It sounds heavenly, doesn't it? There's just one problem. It sounds heavenly, and not like reality.

The Old Testament Scholar, Claus Westermann, suggests that this Psalm dates all the way back to the pre-Davidic era — meaning before King David. If that's true, that means this Psalm is roughly 3,000 years old.

Now, how many natural disasters has this old world been through in the last 3,000 years? How many wars have been waged? Where was God's protection then?

There is in Los Angeles a cathedral. It called the Cathedral of Our Lady of Angels. It's a spiritual haven that sits in the midst of a noisy city. In order to enter the sanctuary, you have to walk through the cathedral's large doors and journey down a long hallway. Upon entering the nave, what you'll most likely immediately notice are the large, handmade tapestries that hang on the walls. They represent the communion of the saints made up of peoples from all over the world and throughout history.

At the front of the worship space, behind the Lord's Table, is a large tapestry depicting a schematic map of the streets of Los Angeles — a city that has known its share of violence and its share of earthquakes. Over the map inscribed on that large tapestry are these words from the book of Revelation: “See, God's dwelling is among mortals. God will dwell with them. They will be God's people. And God will be with them” (21:3).

A tapestry depicting a map of their city and declaring that God dwells there with them, even in the violence, even when the earth quakes.

Why would they do that? Why would they put those words in a tapestry over their altar?

Because, words like these have real power, don't they? Power to instill hope and courage. Power to chase out fear.

When Rolf Jacobson was in high school, he had to have both legs amputated to save his life from cancer. Today, Rolf is an Old Testament professor at Luther Seminary, but back then he was just a *scared* high school kid.

He says he never feared dying. He did, however, fear what would become of his *living*.

- Would he be able to have meaningful work?
- Would he find someone to marry?
- Would he be able to have kids?

In the midst of this fear, he says, Psalm 46 became the center of his faith.

A few years ago, Rolf was at this favorite Mexican restaurant with his kids, when their waiter came to the table. This guy was *HUGE* – football player huge – and as he reached down to hand out menus, he had this prominent tattoo on his forearm that read “Psalm 46:1.” Just that: “Psalm 46:1”

Rolf asked him what that was about. All the he said was: “Really bad childhood.”

Rolf said, “Here was this healthy, strong guy – seemingly *nothing* to fear, and yet – just like me, he clung to: “God is my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, I will not *fear*...”

Fear is no way to live. Emmet Fox once said, “To be afraid is to have more faith in evil than in God.” Living out of a posture of fear puts us and keeps us on our heels. It is impossible to live into the life God intends for us when we live out of fear.

Some time ago, I was out in front of my house, watering the flowers like I do most mornings, and I saw a robin walking down the street. It was a fat robin. Weighed about nine pounds, I guess. “What are you doing walking?” I asked it.

He said, “I’m trying to get some of this weight off.”

“Well, I noticed you’re kind of heavy. Why don’t you fly?” I asked.

The sparrow said, “Fly?”

‘Yeah, why don’t you fly?’

The sparrow said, "Are you crazy? I've never flown before."

I said, "Really? What's your name?"

And he said, "Dan. My name is Dan." (Adapted from Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, 36).

That's what living out of fear does. It keeps us grounded when we were meant for more.

So what wisdom did the ancient Israelites offer us? What word did they give us to encourage us to not live out of a posture of fear?

They said: "Remember in whose hands you really rest:

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

Therefore, *we will not fear...*"

And they didn't just say it. And they didn't just read it. They *sang* it. And they not only *sang* it. They sang it *together* in worship. And we know this because of the notation that is in the original Hebrew just before the psalm that reads: "To the leader. Of the Korahites. According to Alamo. A *song*."

- Leader is more accurately translated as "*music director*" or "*choirmaster*"
- The Korahites were a branch of *singers* for religious services
- Alamo means "young maiden," so most likely "According to Alamo" means in a high pitched voice — like a soprano or possibly a falsetto voice for men
- And, "A song" — Well, I hope I don't need explain to you what a "song" is...

All that to say, Psalm 46 was obviously not just scripture, but a *song* sung in worship. And they sang in worship, because singing has a way of reaching deep into our hearts and giving us the strength and hope we need to face another day — even when our world is a disaster.

Eugene Peterson suggests that song is the result of excess energy. He says, "When we are normal, we talk. When we are dying, we whisper. But when there is more in us than we can contain, *we sing*."

And what this song tells us about the forbearers of our faith is that what they experienced was God as their protection, the source of their strength in hardship, their reason to not be afraid. And they knew that truth so fully that they couldn't help but sing about it.

It's funny that we give Martin Luther so much credit for taking this psalm — his favorite psalm — and turning it into a hymn, which we say was the original inspiration for hymn writing and congregational singing for the last four hundred years, when

what Martin Luther really did was to take an old, old hymn and turn it into a contemporary praise song for his day and his time.

And thank God he did, because through his words and his music, our voices are still being lifted up and our faith is still being strengthened and our fear is still being diminished:

“A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.”

Amen.