

**REFUGE**  
**Psalm 46**

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First Baptist Church of Amarillo is 131 years old. We have experienced World War I, the Great Depression and Dust Bowl (during which we built the sanctuary), World War II, the Vietnam War, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., Watergate, and the terrorist attacks of 9-11. Dark days and unsettling situations are woven into the fabric of our journey as a community of faith. In every circumstance, in every way, our able God has delivered his people.

While we must be prudent in taking precautions as determined by the authorities, prayers have always been our ultimate hope, for God hears the cries of His people. We will both survive through and eventually overcome the coronavirus.

The pandemic, as it has been labeled by the World Health Organization, however, creates a myriad of emotions, and our honesty about these is the first step to healing.

Some of you may be feeling fearful, bombarded by bad news 24/7 – much true and much made up or exaggerated – that can cause us to imagine the whole world is hopeless, helpless, and in hysteria.

May I remind you this morning that both the first and the last words of the Christ-event are “Fear not.” The story of Christ both begins and ends with a divine declaration from an angel, “Fear not.” In Luke 1, the angel Gabriel comes to Mary; his greeting gives her great fear. He comforts her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”

And one chapter over, in Luke 2, when the shepherds are out watching their flocks by night. The angel of the Lord, whose very presence left them paralyzed, declared, “Fear not; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Yes, the first angelic announcement is “Fear not,” but so is the last. The story of the rabbi Jesus is sandwiched between the proclamation, “Fear not.” Because Christ has come, been resurrected from the dead, and shall come again, we are not to be a frightened people – the Christ story begins and ends with “Fear not.”

The women making their way to the tomb in Matthew’s account were Mary of Magdala (Magdala is a city on the Sea of Galilee) and Mary the mother of James and Joseph. We know Mary of Magdala well. In the record of all four Gospels, this one woman stood immovably by Jesus, even in and past his death. She is present when he dies (27:56), there when he is buried (27:61), and now again at his graveside at the first possible opportunity. Jesus had earlier delivered her from seven demons, and she would not, therefore, now desert him (Luke 8:2).

An earthquake occurred. An angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his garment was white as snow. The guards shake in their boots with fear; they become like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know you are looking for Jesus, the one who has been crucified. But He is not here; He has risen, just as He said. Come and see the place where He was lying.”

The angel instructs the women to go and tell the disciples that Jesus is alive and that He is going to Galilee to meet them. And Matthew tells us they departed from the angel with both fear and great joy.

On their way to declare the good news to the disciples, they encounter the resurrected Rabbi himself. His first words, the first words of the resurrected Lord to these two women named Mary: “Do not be afraid.”

Perhaps, likewise, the first and last words of the Christ of the cosmos to us this morning are, “Do not be afraid.” Paul writes in Timothy, “God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

Another emotion that might be in the air during these difficult days is anxiety – the feeling of nervousness or unease. Overwhelming worry about an uncertain outcome. The reality is the anxiety is even more contagious than the coronavirus. Our own anxiety is triggered simply by talking to someone else who is anxious. Wall Street, right now, is one “Big Apple” of anxiety – a social contagion.

Overwhelmed by uncertainty of the unknown and fear of the future, the rational parts of our brains go off-line. Logically we know that we don’t need a ton of toilet paper. But when we see someone else’s cart piled high, we go into survival mode. Just a month ago, the bears had to dance around on TV and beg us to buy toilet paper.

Paul tells us, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

When you start feeling overwhelmed with anxiety, go to God. And go with thanksgiving. Think of all the good things and good gifts we still have from God. Think of all that we have *not* lost.

A third feeling we have all felt is “out of control.” Creation has a bad habit of confusing itself with the Creator. We do not control our futures. We do not control the stock market. We plan weddings that end up going by the wayside because of a virus from China. We cannot even gather in God’s house out of concern for our neighbor’s health.

In the book of James, there is a group of businessmen who are planning out their profits. “We’ll go to this city. We’ll stay there this long. We’ll make this much money,” they say in James 4:13.

But the brother of our Lord reminds us that you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow; you are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live, and we shall do this or that.”

We’ve learned “if the Lord wills” these past few weeks. Our plans mean nothing. We are powerless, and He is powerful. “If the Lord wills....” Surely, you and I will never take the opportunity to worship for granted, It is a privilege given by God. May we flood this place with new passion in a few weeks. And sing His praises with our whole hearts.

In our text this morning in Psalm 46,

## **I. THE PSALMIST SPEAKS OF THE REASSERTION OF CHAOS (v. 1-3).**

We speak naively of terra firma. It isn’t. Geologists have discovered that the continents are actually afloat, continuing to be built and changed by moving plates. Volcanoes are the earth’s heat vents lying near the plate perimeters which are also earthquake-prone. What we have then is a dynamic, living, changing planet set in an exploding, expanding universe. Creation as pictured by deists, like a clock that had been wound up and left to tick along on its own, just doesn’t work. In fact, Creation is a great, drama that seethes with the unexpected but has a meaningful purpose that will reach culmination when Christ comes.

In the first three verses of Psalm 46, the Psalmist describes the world exactly this way. The earth cannot be our fixed position. The Psalmist is describing a time when chaos, when evil seeks to reassert its primacy over both the natural world and in the world of human affairs.

This is a hectic, chaotic disastrous scene. The earth is quaking. Mountains are slipping into the sea. The sea so often represents the watery chaos. Tidal waves roar in foam. It’s the language of the Hebrew prophets. Chaos in nature and in human affairs – not yet fully subdued – still trying to reassert itself. God Himself had acted before – God’s good order had already emerged from primeval chaos.

You remember, in Genesis 1:1-2. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep and the spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.

## **II. WE WILL NOT FEAR (v. 1-3, 4-7)**

Since God is our refuge and strength, the very present help in trouble, we won’t fear even though chaos should seek to reassert itself in our lives. God has been in the business from the beginning of making order out of chaos and, so, we don’t have to be fearful.

Though the foundation of creation itself should shake and warp, we don’t have to fear. We can’t know what circumstances in the life of the Psalmist prompted the song to sing from his heart. Was there an enemy that seemed to hold the upper hand? Was there a catastrophe in his own personal life? I don’t know, we can’t be sure, but whatever was happening to him he likened it unto a crashing of order, peace, and control in his life.

Some of you here this morning are at that very stage today. It seems as if your very world is coming unraveled. Nothing seems certain to you any longer, even the mountains of life seem to be slipping away. The tidal waves are roaring and crashing, the earth quakes! Will someone utter a word of good news?

The Psalmist's depiction of the world is our depiction of the world. But even as the Psalmist saw the uncertainty of his life, he saw the certainty of God. The certainty of God's availability to stay the course. It was as if he weighed the evidence in the balance. The power of chaos – of water, of darkness, of earthquakes or volcanoes – and the power of God. He measured them with care and declared with confidence – we will not fear.

God is our refuge. That means God is our shelter. God is our strength. That is, his might is exerted against His foes. Thus God both protects us as our shelter and fights for us. He is both our shield and our sword for He is always with us – a very present help in trouble.

The word for trouble here means distress, cramped quarters, constricted feeling. God is here to help when the pressure mounts – when the world closes in upon us. So, the confession comes from the Psalmist and from our own lips, therefore, we will not fear.

Our fear is gone because of the provision of the presence of God. Hurricane and tidal wave cannot destroy us and neither can earthquake nor avalanche, virus nor volcano. Through it all God, the Creator and Sustainer of this lively planet holds us fast.

Next, verses 4-7. A reassurance of God's presence and power. With God the waters are no longer life-menacing seas but a life-giving river. The picture of God's help as the quiet water supply of the besieged. (Isaiah 8:6). Over against the watery chaos is God's river, the perennial stream watering Zion is the river of God's mercy and His spirit and it makes His people glad. In the midst of God's city, Jerusalem, there is the Tabernacle of The Most High. God is in the midst of her as she shall not be moved.

Since God lives in Jerusalem, He is her stability. Moreover, when the sun rises and the nations march into battle, God is Jerusalem's security. He need only utter his voice and the whole earth will melt. God is our stability and our security. While all else is moving, the city of God will not be moved though the kingdoms tottered, the city of God is steadfast. Just as His voice was decisive in the formation of the world, His voice will be decisive in dissolving the world.

### **III. BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD (vs. 8-11)**

Look at verses 8-11. This is a vision of things finally to come. The word for "behold" is generally used for seeing with the inward eye, as a "seer" or prophet sees. Although the outcome is peace, the process is judgment. The reassuring words, "He makes wars cease..." are set in a context not of gentle persuasion but of a world devastated and forcibly disarmed. This sequence, with tranquility on the far side of judgment, agrees with both Old Testament prophecy and New Testament apocalypse (e.g., Isaiah 6:10-13; 9:5, Daniel 12:1, 2 Peter 3:12 and forward).

So, too, the injunction, “Be still...” is not, in the first place, comfort for the harassed but a rebuke to a restless and turbulent world. “Quiet!” – in fact, “leave off!” might be a better translation. It resembles the command of Jesus to another raging sea: “Peace! Be still!”

Cease striving. Shhh....

Who among us today can’t identify with the Psalmist here? If we could identify with this crumbling world, how much more his unease?

Be still! “Leave off,” says the Psalmist. Take time to know that I am God. God brings that direct prophetic word and as He brings peace to the earth, so He brings peace to the heart. We can now experience that reality – Be still and know that I am God.

To know that God is God is to experience Him in the quiet of our hearts. This is relational, not merely theological, knowledge. It is letting God’s peace settle down upon us. It is knowing Him as our security and stability in the storm. Be still and know that I am God.

Leave off! Be still and know that I am God.

Listen to the words of God. “Be still ... cease striving ... leave off ... be quiet ... and know that I am God.” Notice as he continues. “Cease striving and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.” The word for exalted means to be lifted up, to be raised high. We think of a victorious coach being carried away from the field by his team receiving the praise of the fans.

God will be raised high and both creation and history will bow to His sovereign will and give him glory. We know that this will take place when Christ returns to manifest the fullness of God’s kingdom. As Philippians says in chapter 2, “every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God.”

The Psalm ends with a repetition of verse 7 – almost like a refrain. Is God big enough to deal with our personal problems? Is He big enough to deal with the crises that we face in our world? Violence in our cities, volcanoes, hurricanes, shifting plates, comets – and, yes, viruses? The God of Psalm 46 commands angelic hosts – volatile nature, expanding creation, historical chaos, wars, and rumors of wars. He is the Lord of many. The Lord of hosts. He’s going to be exalted in the earth.

For many of us listening today, your lives are at that moment of chaos and we, indeed, need God’s refuge – His shelter and His strength. Because in our lives the mountains are slipping into the depth of the sea. The waters are roaring and foaming and the mountains are quaking. We need to come to that river of the providence and the presence of God. A stream in God’s holy city – the dwelling place of the Most High. We need to hear today that God is in control – that He will not be moved. That God will help those who are his people when the morning dawns. That even should the nations themselves uproar and the Kingdoms begin to totter that with the voice of God even the earth can be melted. To know that the Lord of hosts is with us and that the God of Jacob hears our stronghold.

Be still and know that I am God.

Seventy-two years ago, great Christian thinker C. S. Lewis wrote words that ring with some relevance for us today. Perhaps we should just replace the words “atomic bomb” with the word “coronavirus.” Lewis writes:

In one way, we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. “How do we live in an atomic age?” I’m tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year; or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer. An age of paralysis. An age of air raids. An age of motor accidents.’

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, Lewis writes, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented; and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways....

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we’re all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb – [we might say corona virus] – let that bomb, when it comes, find us doing sensible and human things – praying, working, [preaching], reading, listening to music, bathing the children, [walking the dog in the sunshine], chatting to our friends... – not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies, [and he says, maybe prophetically] a microbe can do that, but they need not dominate our minds.

(“On Living in an Atomic Age” (1948) in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*)

“Unprecedented” is the word we have heard a lot these days. My pastor friend, Bobby Dagnel, reminds us that in the midst of epidemics, pandemics, plagues, and mass hysteria, the church has a long history of finding itself at ground zero as a place of hope, peace, care, and ministry.

From A.D. 165-180, during the Antonine Plague, Christians stood tall when the rest fled. Rodney Stark, Professor of Social Sciences at Baylor University wrote in his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, “When pagan leaders, including physicians, fled, Christians stayed to serve.”

The same was true with the Plague of Cyprian in A.D. 250-270, or the bubonic plague in 1527. Great reformer Martin Luther, when the black death of the bubonic plague struck Wittenberg in 1527, took precautions, refused to leave, and chose to minister to the sick. Luther’s epidemic ethic rings clear: man your post.

We have to be wise and listen to the advice of the medical experts. Being foolish only adds to the frenzy. But this virus will give the church a new vision to be calm presence of Christ in the chaos. There will be new ways for us to love. New ways for us to hope. New opportunities for us to give. And new possibilities for us to be the presence of Christ in the midst of the chaos.

God is our refuge and strength. Therefore, we will hope. And not only will we hope, we will carry that hope to the world that is hurting. First Baptist Church Amarillo will be better on the other side – focused and fierce for the gospel. Together, we will move forward in courage. We will be okay. God has never left His throne.

And when we are able to gather again, everyone should be in their place, shouting praise to God.

Let us pray.