

Sermon Lent 5 2020

March 29, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read, especially these words: "Before Abraham was I AM."

In times of trial as we're experiencing, one of the things I find helpful is working on memorizing portions of Scripture. Now, I'm assuming most of you have heard me speak about that before, but it's always a good thing to be encouraged to do. As it says in Psalm 119, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Or in the ESV that we use, "I have stored up your word in my heart." What is memorizing that word besides hiding it in our hearts, storing it there, making it a part of our being?

As I say that, recently I have been working to memorize Psalm 46. You may recall that's the Psalm that Luther was inspired by when he wrote his great hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God." I also included portions of it in the email that I sent when we first began having to address Covid-19 and these issues of social distancing. That said, here it is in its entirety:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. *Selah* 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 her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah* Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

What comforting words those are in the midst of these times. The first verse I often think of with this is that one that so many of us know: **Be still and know that I am God.** That verse that tells us that God is in charge of this. The verse that tells us that He will be exalted, He will not let Himself be crushed and those who are His will not be put to shame. That's comforting. And a good reminder for us to let our anxieties be quieted.

Then there are the first words of the Psalm: God is our refuge and strength. He's a very present help in our trouble. He's with us. He promises it. Yes we might not feel it. We might feel anxiety at what will happen. We might be anxious about our loved ones getting sick, our about our economy crashing with no ability to quickly revive. We might be angry about the way this is being handled. But no matter the emotions we feel, this word stands. God is there. He is present with you. Therefore you don't fear. Though the earth gives way and even the mountains would crumble into the sea. There He is. With you. Not leaving you. In fact, you as the Church are the dwelling place of the Most High. As He comes to you by His Holy Spirit in His Word, as He meets you in His Holy Supper. There He is with you, you will not be moved. He will help you when the morning dawns.

Even further, the nations can rage at each other in war, kingdoms can fall, governments can fail, and yet there He is: standing firm and unflappable. There He is the Lord of Hosts, YAHWEH Sabaoth, He is with you; the God of Jacob, your fortress. And as I mentioned this as Luther's inspiration for the hymn, I'm sure you can see it there: God our fortress, our Feste Burg, who will not crumble under any attack and who will shelter us in His care.

As I say all this, then, you might be wondering what this has to do with John Chapter 8. After all, I said that we'd be meditating on those words from the Gospel, not Psalm 46. Psalm 46 wasn't even the appointed Psalm. Instead it was Psalm 43, "Vindicate me O God," the Psalm for which this Sunday got its Latin name: Judica Sunday. And here I am talking about Psalm 46. Why?

Well, many of you have perhaps heard me read this on a visit to you in the hospital, or with a trial. You may in that know where I am going. You see, as comforting this Psalm is, and those words are utterly comforting, I always find it interesting that in the middle of it you have this verse that easily could rip all of the comfort away, if it's not understood properly. That's verse 8: **Come, behold the works of the Lord, how He has brought desolations on the earth.** Now, I said that about this needing to be understood properly, and so I want you to hang with me to understand it properly. Don't stop listening when you begin to think I'm ripping away comfort. Trust me, the comfort that is here is great.

Now, in this verse about God bringing desolations, the Hebrew word there means waste or appalment, even horrors. The Greek in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint has the word *terata*, which connects to the idea of terrible signs, terrible miraculous wonders. When we see the things going on around

us, I think we can identify with that. Behold how these things come. Behold how these “Acts of God” as we even call them sometimes, occur.

What does the world say about them? The look at this and they say that it becomes impossible to believe in the kind of God who works these sorts of things, don't they? I saw a fair amount of criticism in the media about Vice President Pence's statement that they would be praying for God's help in this. They essentially said that you can pray about this, but the real help will come from science-as if praying for an answer precludes God working through scientists to provide it. But that's the view isn't it? That the God who allows evil like this, or “works desolations” is unworthy of trust.

What do we say to this? How do we continue in trust? Well Christians, we hide in Him who is our fortress. We come to Him in the realization that these desolations, these terrible wonders weren't His intent for the world in the beginning. He didn't want this world to suffer when He created it. His desire for creation wasn't that it would groan under the curse of sin. His desire for humanity wasn't that we would get Covid-19 or cancer or heart attacks, or even the common cold. But understanding that these come from sin, we hide in Him our Fortress. We hide in the Fortress of Yahweh Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts.

And it's there that we have the connection to this Gospel Lesson this morning. You see, and I think many of you know this, when we see the Name “Lord” written in the Old Testament with a large capital L and small capital ord, that means the Name written there in the Hebrew is Yahweh, or Jehovah. And hopefully you all know what that Name is. If you don't go read Exodus 3. There on the mountain as the Lord appeared to Moses. And He revealed a Name by which the people would call upon Him. Yahweh. In English, I AM.

In our Gospel Lesson, what do we see? We see Jesus having this whole argument with the Jews about them being children of the Devil. Not because Jews are especially evil, or anything of that sort. No, but because Jesus is standing there claiming that their God is His Father, and they don't believe His Word. Finally, Jesus makes the point that they like to claim Abraham as their father, but Abraham wanted Jesus' day to come.

And I love the way it's said there. They look at Jesus and they laugh because Jesus isn't even fifty years old. Abraham lived something like 2000 years before them, and yet Jesus says Abraham saw His day and rejoiced. You see He says, “Before Abraham was, I am.” Now on the one hand I have always liked this because it speaks about Jesus' existence. Before Abraham Jesus was there. But that's not merely the point. He could have said, “Before Abraham was, I was.” Instead, though, He says, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” “Before Abraham was, Yahweh.”

And you see Christians, there is the connection. The Lord of Hosts, the Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of Jacob who is our Fortress is the God who dwelt bodily in the man Jesus Christ. In fact, this week on the 25, nine month before Christmas, we had the Feast of the Annunciation; the feast celebrating the day the Angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her that she would have a child. And who does he say that child is? Immanuel. God with us. Yahweh Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Jacob in the flesh as our Fortress.

And there is our comfort. When we hear that this Lord, this Yahweh, brings desolations, we see His real heart in Jesus. In the God who was willing to enter into our humanity and carry all of our sin to the cross, we see who this loving God actually is. In Jesus, our beloved we see the greatest desolation of all, the most terrible wonder of all: the perfect man, God in the flesh crucified in the place of sinners.

Christians, there we see what it means that He is our fortress. We see that this means no matter the desolations, no matter the wonders, no matter the sickness or trial, He has stepped in front of the attack, borne the cost of the war in our place. And in His resurrection, we see that His action in doing this has provided the proof of His victory; the proof of our forgiveness. It's provided the promise that all of our sin is forgiven.

What does that mean for us, then? It means that as we endure the days ahead we do so in the assurance that this God loves us and truly wants what's best for us. It means that as we look at the Crucified I AM, that we see the full judgment of God poured out so that we can experience our trials now in the knowledge of the love of this God, that we can experience them not as punishment, but as the loving chastisement and discipline of a Father who cares for us. It means that we really can understand that no matter the outcome of our circumstances, we can know that this God truly is with us. This God will truly never leave us, nor forsake us. We can trust that when Jesus says, "Before Abraham was, I Am," He was, but became man to give us the promise of His care for our humanity.

Christians, hide then above all that word in your heart. Store that promise in your being in this time, that you would not fear or have anxiety. Keep it that you would not overflow with anxiety, or anger, or any of the emotions that would draw your attention away from the good work the Lord of Hosts is doing. You see, when we know who this Lord is, then we have all the comfort in the world. Truly the comfort far beyond it, because we know the care, the protection, and the love this great God has for us as our Fortress. Amen.