

The Exaltation of Yahweh

Psalm 46

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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

² *Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;*

³ *though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*

⁴ *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.*

⁵ *God is in the midst of the city;
it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.*

⁶ *The nations are in an uproar,
the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice,
the earth melts.*

⁷ *The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

⁸ *Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.*

⁹ *He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow,
and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.*

¹⁰ *“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”*

¹¹ *The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. (NRSV)*

What is the worst possible thing that could happen to you? What are you most afraid of, the one event you would like to avoid at all possible cost? Is it getting brain cancer and dying? Is it losing your spouse or child? Perhaps it's coming home from vacation and seeing a huge pile of ashes where your house once stood. Or is it losing your job and then not being able to find another one?

Perhaps what you fear most is some world-wide cataclysmic event. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the thing I feared the most was nuclear war. We don't talk much about nuclear war

anymore, although it could still happen. Now we're more likely to be afraid of global warming and its consequences or of a widespread economic collapse. Perhaps you are most afraid of what the next presidential administration might do?

Once you know what you're really and truly afraid of, then you're ready to enter the world of Psalm 46. In verse 2, this psalm imagines something close to the worst possible scenario, something akin to a class 5 hurricane and a 10.0 Richter-scale earthquake happening at the same time.¹ The poet wants us to imagine what our world would be like if mountains shook and trembled, if the waters roared and foamed. In your mind, see and hear what the psalmist is imagining. Watch the Rocky Mountains and the Swiss Alps, Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Everest, shake so hard that they might collapse into a heap of rubble. Listen as the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, Arctic, and Antarctic Oceans, plus all five Great Lakes, roar and crash, swirl and heave, sending tsunamis ricocheting around the globe.

That's verse 2; jump now to verse 6. The first half of verse 6 says that "The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter." In Hebrew, those words "uproar" (*hāmû*) and "totter" (*māṭû*) are closely related to the words "shake" (*bēmôṭ*), "roar" (*yehēmû*), and "tremble" (*bēmôṭ*) back in verse 2.² So it's not just the world's geography that is collapsing; the world's countries are collapsing too. Governments all over the world are falling apart, and it does not matter whether they are democracies, empires, dictatorships, oligarchies, or kingdoms. Political organizations of all types are disintegrating. In verses 2 and 6, the world as we know it is coming undone. This situation is almost as bad as it could possibly get.

Who is causing all this to happen? We find out who in the last half of verse 6. It is Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Jacob, who is doing all this. God utters the divine voice, and as a consequence, "the earth melts." Think of what happens when an ice cube melts: it loses its shape, its crystalline structure. It turns into water that runs every which way. What was solid now becomes liquid and chaotic. According to verse 6, that is what God is doing in the imaginative world of this psalm. The hot and holy breath of Yahweh is melting the world.

Why is Yahweh doing this? Look at verse 9 for the answer: God is doing this because God is fed up with war. God "breaks the bow," "shatters the spear," and "burns the shields with fire." To our ears that might seem like relatively tame stuff. By modern standards of war, bows, spears, and shields are useless weapons. But remember that in the ancient world those three things, along with chariots, were state of the art weapons. They were expensive to manufacture because

they stretched the outer limits of technological skills then available to powerful nations like Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia. So if those bows, spears, and shields seem wimpy to you, then insert modern weapons: God busts up Apache attack helicopters, shatters Minuteman ICBMs, and burns Humvees with fire. God cracks open both Nimitz–class aircraft carriers and Virginia-class submarines, scuttling them all at the bottom of the sea. God hopelessly jams M-16 rifles, slices F-22 Raptor jets in two, and torches M1A2 Abrams tanks. God turns all this state of the art military hardware, costing trillions of dollars, into worthless junk.

Now you understand why “the nations are in an uproar,” in the words of verse 6. To put it colloquially, the nations of the world are screaming because God has just taken away their military toys. And without state of the art technology for armies, navies, air forces, or marines, governments are collapsing left and right. Their power has been taken away. “Come,” says the poet in verse 8, “Behold the works of Yahweh; see what desolations God has brought on the earth.” This desolation brought about by God is precisely the destruction of war itself. What God wrecks is military hardware, everything from the smallest bullet to the largest aircraft carrier, from the slowest jeep to the fastest jet.

Notice, please, that no one dies in all this destruction. God shatters military equipment, but not people.³ It is bows, spears, and shields that God goes after, not men, women, and children. It is the nations that come unglued, not the people in those nations. God does not murder.

But in this psalm, God is relentlessly opposed to war. Not just some wars, but all wars. We like to make distinctions between just wars and unjust wars, between offensive wars and defensive wars, between conventional wars and wars on terror. Usually these distinctions are sophisticated efforts to persuade us that some wars are ok. National leaders try this ploy whenever they want to rally public support for bombing whomever it is they want to bomb. You know how this deception works: it’s perfectly ok, say our leaders, to invade Iraq and Afghanistan, because those are justified wars on terror. But when Russia invades Georgia? That’s naked, perverse, and unjustified aggression! This hypocrisy that says it’s ok when we invade but not ok when the Russians invade, is obvious to nearly everyone else in the world, even if it’s not obvious to those in the White House. Psalm 46 sideswipes all that hypocrisy and deception by making no distinctions. God will end *all* wars, not just wars fought by the so-called bad guys. God will topple *all* nations, not just the nations who happen to be our enemies.

In the last eight years, the government of George W. Bush has fought wars against the tiny nations of Iraq and Afghanistan, with the goal of creating security and stability. Many U.S. presidents have fought wars, and Bush is merely the most recent. It has not worked, despite the fact that these wars will cost the United States an estimated \$3 trillion.⁴ Aside from the nasty fact that most of us will be paying that bill for the rest of our lives, the world is now arguably less secure than it was eight years ago. Putting faith in Humvees and helicopters has not increased security and stability.

But for authentic people of faith, that failure comes as no surprise. We know, as we've always known, that security and stability can only come from Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, the God of Jacob. Security and stability can never come from tanks or jets. And that is exactly what Psalm 46 insists upon. "God is our refuge and strength," announces the very first verse, and this affirmation is repeated twice more in verses 7 and 11. Do not look to the president for safety; look to God. Do not count on the Pentagon for security; count on God. Do not trust in the latest, most expensive ways to shoot people; trust in God.

The loveliest, gentlest passage in this psalm comes in verses 4 and 5. "There is a river," says the poet, "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." When this psalm was written, these verses probably referred to the city of Jerusalem, then considered by Jews to be the city of God. But even so, this lovely image is not exactly historical, for the simple reason that Jerusalem had no river with gushing streams. All Jerusalem had in those days was the Gihon, a small underground stream which supplied only a modest amount of water.⁵ Moreover, the city was destroyed in 586 B.C.E. during a war with Babylonia—so that even the historical Jerusalem tottered and collapsed, just as the nations totter and collapse.

Therefore Psalm 46 invites us to think of these images happening in the future. Meanwhile we can live by our imaginations. In our imagination we can picture mountains shaking and oceans foaming. In our dreams we can see the destruction God will yet wreck upon war. In our visions we can behold a blessed, bubbling river flowing from the heart of God, water to quench our thirst for peace, water to make our souls glad.

Someone has said that there are really only two questions we have for God. Our first question for God is, "Do you care about us?" And the second question is, "Are you able to save us?"⁶ In answer to these fundamental questions, Psalm 46 says "yes" and "yes," because God is

our refuge and strength (v. 1). Yes, God cares about us because God is our refuge, a person in whom we can live and place where we can be safe. Yes, God is able to save us, because God is our strength, a strength that far surpasses that of presidents and Pentagons, tanks and torpedoes.

And so it is that at the end of this psalm, in verse 10, Yahweh utters a command: “Be still and know that I am God!” In the context of the psalm, the command to “be still!” has very little to do with quiet, contemplative prayer. Instead the Hebrew (*harpû*) means something like “Stop! Settle down!”⁷ with the sense of dropping your weapons from the positions you would use to kill other people. In other words, it’s a command to lay down your weapons, to quit fighting, to end the violence.⁸ With this command there is now a new reality in the world. Now that all the world’s military hardware is busted up, and all nations of the earth are collapsed into the dirt, only Yahweh is left standing. Now only God is exalted high above the nations. Only God is exalted in the earth, because God has finally, and decisively, created shalom.

Therefore, let us not be afraid (v. 2).

Notes

1. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 865.
2. William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 115-116.
3. Robert McAfee Brown, “The God Who Stamps Out War,” in *Preaching on Peace*, ed. Ronald J. Sider and Darrel J. Brubaker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 46.
4. See Linda J. Bilmes and Joseph E. Stiglitz, “The Iraq War Will Cost Us \$3 Trillion, and Much More,” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2008; <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/07/AR2008030702846.html>, accessed September 12, 2008.
5. Brown, 116.
6. Page H. Kelley, quoted in Greg C. Earwood, “Psalm 46,” *Review and Expositor* 86 (1989), 84.
7. Brown, 116.
8. I am indebted to James E. Brenneman for this point, shared with me after I preached this sermon.