



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Help”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Psalm 46; Psalm 121

August 26, 2018

Before anything else, I want to take a minute to thank Abby, and all of those who have taken the time to share their thoughts on Scripture over the course of the summer. It is not always easy to stand up in front of a large group and talk about something as personal and emotional as the meaning of Scripture can be, but we’ve been tremendously blessed by the heart and faith that has been voiced by all of our speakers this summer, and I am deeply appreciative for the gift you all shared. So, to all of you who took part, I give you my deepest thanks.

One of the challenges in the midst of this series that I have named before, however, has been the sometimes daunting task of attempting to find some fresh or new meaning in Scriptures that we know exceptionally well. I have spent a lot of time, in many of these sermons this summer, trying to break away from the obvious, the familiar, the common meaning that we naturally draw from passages that we’ve heard so many times before. And, it was, of course, no different with Psalm 46. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in struggle.” As we travelled back from visiting family and friends in Michigan, last week, I batted those words around in my mind repeatedly, for hours on end. Where would we go with this? What would I share about such a classic reflection of the promise of God in our lives? What might I say to bring new life to this long-treasured Psalm.

I still had no answer to that question as I came into the office on Tuesday morning and stared down the deadlines of identifying the worship details we would need for today. Then, before I as much as got settled at my desk for the morning, the floods began to come.

- It started with a Facebook note from a good friend we had just seen a few days earlier in Michigan. Just hours before, his mother had succumbed to her long battle with cancer and he and his family were facing those very first moments of grief and sorrow.
- Not more than hour later, a text came in from another dear friend and former colleague in ministry. His father had been rushed to the hospital after a fall and was currently in the ICU facing tests to determine the cause behind what he was experiencing.
- The day continued as I got a call from Becca (our oldest), at the house, telling me that our neighbor had come by to notify us that the overnight storms had caused one of our trees to topple over and that tree was now leaning on their house.

- Meanwhile, as I was rushing home to take a look at the tree issue, Mike, our custodian here at the church, was sopping up water and trying to dry carpets that got drenched in a few of our lower level classrooms due to a failed sump pump during those same overnight storms.
- As afternoon turned to evening, the flood of news continued as Cam approached me after our Council meeting to share that, Paige Berndt, the woman who had drowned in Lake Michigan up in Ozaukee County was his friend and boss at Water Street Brewery in Grafton, and that the man that was still missing was her fiancé, to whom she was to be married next month.
- Finally, after all of that on Tuesday, I awakened Wednesday to text my mother and say happy birthday, as she began to spend her 75th birthday at medical appointments with my father who is facing his third major heart procedure in the last 14 months.

I walked into the office Tuesday trying to figure out what new and fresh thoughts I might bring to this long-treasured Psalm. I walked back in, Wednesday morning, with a very different mindset. Maybe, just maybe, there are times that we don't need to hear what is new, or different, or fresh. Maybe, just maybe, sometimes we are best to just be reminded of the promise that we so desperately cling to when the floods of this life rush upon us.

“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.”

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

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

“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.”

You know, from what I can tell in my notes and records, the last time I actually preached a sermon on this 46th Psalm – where it was the primary focus of my Sunday message – was just shy of 17 years ago. It was Sunday, September 16, 2001. Just two years into ministry, 27 years old, and 5 weeks into married life, I joined throngs of other terrified, overwhelmed, newly ordained ministers facing the greatest national tragedy our generation had ever known, trying to figure out what, in the name of God, we would say to the pain and fear our congregations knew in the wake of those attacks. Like so many others, however, what ended up happening was my coming to realize that there was precious little I should, in the name of God, say to the pain and fear the congregation knew in the wake of those attacks. Much to the contrary, what I needed to was to get out of the way and let the power and promise of the word of God speak for itself. I spent far more time reading Scripture and praying for God's comfort, that day, than I spent pontificating on some intellectual analysis of the Bible.

Exploring the living word of God, and how it speaks anew to our lives, is an imperative and life-giving portion of our journey of faith – and it is something we do most every Sunday in worship.

Sometimes, however, we need the word of God to ring into the reality of our days with the purity of the promise it proclaims. And, when those floods came to so many around me earlier this week, I was reminded again that these words of the Psalmist speak with a voice and promise that, in so many ways, simply need nothing more.

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As I reflected on those words more and more throughout this week, I was drawn to the opening question of the 121st Psalm that we proclaimed as our Call to Worship this morning.. “I lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?” After spending a week trying to figure out my take, my spin, my fresh perspective on this passage, the floods of life coming upon those around me drew my heart right back to the answer the Psalmist gives... “My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth!”

That’s the same question, and answer, that Martin Luther asked in his adaptation of this Psalm that we know as the hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” He names it in his second verse...

Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right man on our side, the man of God’s own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he!
Lord Sabaoth His Name, From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

If there is anything to be said about the promise of the 46th Psalm, if there is any ‘preaching’ to be done on the hope the Psalm inspires, it is that very reminder. There are times that life is going to happen. There are times that the floods are going to come upon us and upon those around us. There are times in which those floods are going to be so great that it will seem that the water and the mountains, the very foundations of everything that surrounds us, are being moved by the struggles and strife we see. But, in that moment, will we remember from where our help comes? Our help comes from one place...our rest is in one place...our peace is in one place... “Be still, and know that I am God! The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

We really don’t need to be more clever, more creative, or more fresh than that. Life will happen...God will be in the midst of that life...and our help will come from the Lord. More often than not, I’m simply not sure there is anything more important that needs to be said. “Be still, and know that I am God! The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

