

The Passion of the Psalms: Safe and Secure

June 1, 2008

Year A: Third Sunday after Pentecost

Camp Norwesca; near Chadron, Nebraska
Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

An elderly woman had just returned to her home from an evening of church, when she was startled by an intruder. As she caught the man in the act of robbing her home of its valuables, she yelled, "Stop!! Acts 2:38!!" (Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven)

The burglar stopped in his tracks. The woman called the police and explained what she had done. As the officer cuffed the man to take him in, he asked the burglar "Why did you just stand there? All that old lady did was yell a passage of scripture to you!"

"Scripture?" replied the burglar, "She said she had an AX and two 38's!!"¹

Today our message centers on being safe and secure. As I mentioned last week the Psalms are full of passion. They represent our human experience right down to its raw emotion and feeling. The Psalms play such an important role in our relationship with God. Back in the Biblical world they were read and sung for people in particular need. Folks, this still rings true today. Psalm 46 is chosen for us when we need to feel safe and secure.

For our reading today please turn to Hymn #570 (Norwesca) / #780 (sanctuary)

[Psalm 46:1-11 \(NRSV\)](#)

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; ³though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Selah

⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. ⁵God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. ⁶The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. ⁷The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Selah

⁸Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. ⁹He 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."
¹¹The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

¹ "Acts 2:38." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part III.* 18.

Selah

Last week I shared with you a Psalm that focused on Trust. According to that Psalm we can not - nor should we - put our trust in power, put our trust in money, put our trust in possessions. Our trust can only be with God.

Now today our Psalm focuses on the twin concepts of safety and security. What is interesting about the notion of safe and secure is that it is a lot easier to believe in trust when everything around you is safe and secure. Let me give you an example.

Three years ago, Sarah and I decided that it was time to move and so we put our name into the hat and then came the hardest part – we had to wait. We didn't know where we were moving, nor if we would be moving at all. It was the ultimate form of trust for the entire decision was out of our hands. We were not safe and secure because we were not in control.

What I remember about that process is that I wanted to take back that control. I wanted that safe and secure feeling again. What I really wanted to do was call the District Superintendent up and say: take our name off the list. We haven't heard from you, so, we are not moving. But it was the wisdom of Brian Kottas – my dear friend – who told me that with every move he had, he always felt out of control, and yet everything always worked out. He trusted the Holy Spirit. His safety and security truly rested with God. Maybe that is why he is a DS – his maturity level concerning the Holy Spirit is much better than mine.

Well, this year – and I can safely say this since my letter has been read – I was nervous. I did not want to move and I did everything in my power to ensure it. I gave every reason in the book. I assured myself that indeed the Conference would not appoint me to some where else. But I'll be honest with you. My safety and security gland was working over time. I was so nervous and worried that every time my cell phone rang, I was sure that my caller ID would say: DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT. And I was sure he was going to say, Seth pack your bags. I had convinced myself of this that I told myself that if Brian Kottas did indeed call me I would not answer the phone. I thought, "they can't move me if they can't reach me – right!"

Folks, I could not put faith into trust because I wasn't feeling safe and secure. It didn't matter that I was told several times I wasn't moving. It didn't matter that everyone including my wife, my secretary, others that I shared this concern with all said, "Oh, Seth, they won't move you." I wasn't in control of the process and so my faith in trust was not there. Am I hitting a nerve here: it sure is a lot easier to trust in faith when you are in control. It sure is easier to feel safe and secure when you are in the driver's seat.

Some of you know the author Chuck Swindoll as a very faithful man and even more so a faithful Christian. But even Swindoll has found he can't control everything.

He tells of the story of flying in one of those twin engine planes. There was only one other person on that plane - the pilot. But as he describes it there was one other. They descended through thick fog, rolled, dipped, lurched. And at one point the pilot looked at Chuck and exclaimed, "Hey, Chuck, isn't this great?" Swindoll didn't answer. He was sweating it out on his knees.

As the lonely plane knifed through the overcast pre-dawn sky, Chuck was reviewing every Bible verse he'd ever known and reconfessing every wrong he'd ever done.

Swindoll says he couldn't believe his companion that night. He was whistling and humming like it was all a bike ride through the park. His passenger, however, had ten fingernails imbedded in the cushion. The flight records may have indicated two passengers on that eerie Monday morning, but Swindoll can vouch for at least three. An unyielding creature called *Fear* and Chuck shared the same seat.²

When do you need this Psalm – when the future seems uncertain, when fear and you share the same seat? This Psalm is for those times when worry dominates all of your thought, all of your conversation. I have a poster that I had my mom made for me. It hangs in my office as a testament – really – to this Psalm. *I know worry works. 90% of what I worry about never happens.*

This is a Psalm for anyone who feels out of control. This is a Psalm for anyone who is having trouble trusting in the Holy Spirit. This Psalm is for anyone who is ready for God to remind them safety and security can be and will be restored again. This Psalm reminds us that God is still faithful, God will take care of us, that we are under God's protection. This Psalm reminds us that no matter the ravages of the world around us we can still trust that God will keep us safe and secure.

Linda had been poisoned by chemicals, resulting in the destruction of her immune system, making her literally "allergic to the world." As a result, she was in and out of intensive care and isolation units for five years of her young adult life. She recalls, "Most of the time, I didn't even think coherently. I was just too busy trying to survive."

Linda struggled with one small goal during those years of intense suffering. Each day, she would read one verse of Scripture and pray for one minute. Just to do that – to pray over one verse of God's Word was "an overwhelming task."

When she was able to leave the prison of her hospital isolation, she founded Direct Link, an organization that links a disabled person to a source of help and support. Says Linda, "The Lord gave me suffering so that I could help the suffering world of the disabled."³

When do you need to hear this Psalm when the bottom has fallen out of your life and trust is difficult to grasp and you don't feel safe and secure. This Psalm is for you when life throws something terribly terribly wrong at you. When do you need this Psalm – when you need a timely word from God. And that is why I love the New English Bible's translation of this passage. Let me share with you verses 1-2.

God is our shelter and our refuge, a timely help in trouble; so we are not afraid when the earth heaves and the mountains are hurled into the sea, when its waters seethe in tumult and the mountains quake before his majesty.

² Charles Swindoll. "Fear on plane." *Ibid.*, 3.

³ Billy Graham. "Help the suffering disabled of the world." *Ibid.*, Part V. 6.

Do you hear those words? This is not a passage that says God controls everything. How often have we said a prayer and nothing has happened? How often have we asked for guidance from God and we get that feeling that God did not hear us? How often have we wondered why God didn't stop this event, or make me not do this, or why didn't God stop this from occurring? Folks, this is not a Psalm that says – God dictates every moment, or determines every time we go to the bathroom, or stops disasters from happening. This is a Psalm that says that God is there exactly – a timely help – just when you need God the most.

Let me tell you a story from author Cindy Cunningham. The year was 1990. Cindy had been taking her one-year-old daughter to different doctors, with no results. When finally one doctor said, "We can't find anything wrong with her, but something is making her malnourished and thin. Let's check her brain."

And she heard a diagnosis that her nor any other mother was ready hear: a brain tumor. They would have to operate.

The surgery went well. The tumor was non-malignant, but the doctor couldn't get it all. Cindy's daughter recovered, and for the following 14 months she was a normal little girl. But after a periodic scan, the doctor told her something she didn't want to hear. The tumor was growing and this little girl needed more surgery. Cindy Cunningham prepared herself.

After her second surgery, the doctor told Cindy that her daughter had a stroke. Part of her brain died. When she went to see her, her baby was totally incapacitated. She couldn't eat, was blind, couldn't walk or even hold up her head. Who could blame Cindy for what she did next. She withdrew, overcome with grief, from her daughter.

She was alive, but she would never see her precious child as she was, ever again.

It was now late summer, 1991, and Cindy remembers sitting in a chair, crying. She looked up and prayed, "*Heavenly Lord, lift me up from this devastating grief so that I will never return to it again. I am ready now to do your will. I trust you.*"

And almost immediately Cindy Cunningham felt better, more courageous. She was ready to go see her daughter. That day, when she went to the hospital, God went with her. Cindy's daughter started to respond to her mother's voice. She loved her mom.

Today, Cindy's has never fully recovered, but she is still with her mom. And Cindy has learned so much from her. As Cindy Cunningham says, "what a hard road we have traveled, but oh, what a blessed one."⁴

God is our shelter and our refuge, a timely help in trouble; so we are not afraid when . . .

Last week I mentioned this wonderful book by Judy Hoff called *Psalms from the Heartland*. Here is her interpretation of Psalm 46.

There were times

When I could not keep my thought on you, O God,

Or speak what I felt in my heart.

⁴ Cindy Cunningham. "Little girl had brain tumor." *Ibid.*, 15.

I was troubled, had so much to do,
And could not quit to be alone with you.
Then I listened to your words in music.
I played the song, again and again.
The melody washed over me;
The soothing words reached into my aching heart.

Though the mountains may fall
And the hills turn to dust,
Yet the love of the Lord will stand,
As a shelter for all
Who will call on His name.

The music comforts me; your love is everlasting!
My heart is no longer troubled; I am not afraid.
Everything around me can crumble; I am secure.
God is my shelter; God is my strength.

Sing the praise and the glory of God.⁵

When trouble comes and we feel out of control and everything around us is crumbling, remember God and remember this Psalm. God is passionate to keep you safe and secure. You can trust in that. Amen.

⁵ Daniel L. Schutte, "Though the Mountains May Fall" quoted in Judy F. Hoff. *Psalms from the Heartland*. (self published. 1999.)