

C Reformation 10.30.22

Psalm 46

Focus Statement: God cannot be moved.

Well, in case you have missed it, the election to end all elections is coming up. I don't know about you all, but at our house every day brings a new fantastical flyer about Dave Morgan's book of bad ideas, Hilary Scholten's support of the Grand Rapids rioters, John Gibbs radical think tank—which, let's not give Gibbs that much credit. He didn't run a think tank, he wrote a website from his college dorm room, but anyway—Gretchen Whitmer's plans to indoctrinate our children. TV ads are ripe with calls to watch out for "taxin' Terry Sabo" and "David the Defunder," along with a very confused couple trying to understand what the propositions mean. "This one gets rid of all the laws. What laws? Do we just guess?" I got a letter the other day from a doctor, with a list of who I should and shouldn't vote for to protect my health care. "I can't believe your doctor sent you a political letter," Travis remarked. "Oh no," I clarified. "This is not my doctor; my doctor and I talk about my actual health care. This is a random doctor from Norton Shores, I don't know this doctor."

It's ridiculous, the claims being made on both sides of the aisle, but it's also terrifying. It's terrifying because so much of it is simply, patently untrue, and yet when you hear it day after day after day, it can wear down your defenses. And what's worse, we know there are people out there who believe it, all of it, hook, line and sinker. Even worse than that are the people who we know don't believe it, but are using the hype for their own benefit, to build their own power bases, gain their own rewards. The Bishop and I were talking at the Churchwide Assembly this summer, and somehow the topic of the current political climate came up. "I'm not a doomsdayer by any stretch of the imagination," I told him. "I tend to

have a very even keel view of the world, that all things tend to right themselves given time. But recently I find myself wondering, is this what it felt like in the time before the fall of Rome?"

Because it's not just elections, is it? It's climate change, it's inflation, it's guns, it's race relations, it's the Ukraine and whatever Putin might try next, and the general rise of authoritarianism. Anything and everything feels like we are standing on the brink, like any slight movement could bring us to disaster.

Dear people of God, it is at times like this then there is no greater gift for us than the Psalms. I don't usually preach on the psalms, I'm actually not sure I've ever preached on the psalms. But when I read the assigned psalm for Reformation Sunday this week, while the instability around me continued, and the attack ads poured into my mailbox, and, and, and, I felt the ground below me fall still. Because the gift of the psalms is this reminder that we are not the first to feel this way. So let's dig into Psalm forty-six this morning, and see what assurance it offers.

First off, if the psalm sounded familiar when we read it this morning, that's because we'd sang it not ten minutes before. Psalm forty-six is the psalm from which A Mighty Fortress Is Our God is based. The story is that Luther wrote it in the late fifteen-twenties, when the fledgling Protestant movement was facing harsh persecution from the Catholic church. Sitting in his study in Wittenburg, looking out at the city wall built to protect the city from invaders, Luther reflected on Psalm forty-six and how God was for him like that wall, strong

and solid, built to withstand any invasion. A Mighty Fortress, and the psalm which inspired it, have since provided comfort for any number of God's people facing any number of crises. Fellow reformers Melanchthon and Jonas sang it in exile, the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus led his troops in song before battles, German refugees fleeing religious persecution in the seventeenth century used it as a traveling hymn. Psalm forty-six is a psalm for times of uncertainty.

The psalm starts with this threefold description of God. God is our refuge, our strong fortress, the one in whom we can trust. God is strength, God is in control, not whatever powers, nations, or enemies the psalmist may be facing. And, most importantly, God is not a neutral power. This strength and refuge is for us. God is, the psalmist makes clear, a very present, well proven help in trouble.

God can be counted on. Which is good because the psalm is about to get real crazy.

"Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult." This is a scary enough image in English but place it in its cultural context. For the people of the psalmist time, the understanding of the earth was that dry land was sort of precariously positioned between the crashing waters of the sea and the sky. Mountains were the foundation which anchored the land in place in the sea and the pillars which held up the sky. So, if the mountains shook, it was real bad news bears. But, said the psalmist, "we will not fear."

The psalm then moves from the cosmic to the political. “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter.” Fun fact, the word uproar here, same word that was used to describe the roar of the sea. And the tottering kingdoms, that’s the word from the shaking and trembling mountains. There is this sense of movement and instability in both the world both cosmic and political. But also, “God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be moved.” That moved, same word. The mountains are moving, the kingdoms are moving, but the city of God stands firm. Why? Because “The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

Dear people of God, here’s the promise. No matter how chaotic, how uncertain, how off-balance, you, your life, the world itself feels, God is the solid foundation you can stand on. God will not be moved. Everything around you can and will move. Everything around us has moved for millennium before, will continue to move for millennium to come, but God is not moving. We are not the first people to feel unsteady, we will not be the last to feel unsteady. But our time frame is short, God’s is long. This psalm reminds us that God has been the immovable force for God’s people since before there were people, and God will be until after the end of time and beyond. Think about all that has changed in the world not in your lifetime but in God’s lifetime, all that is yet to change, and yet, through all that change, God has been, is, will be constant. God does not move.

The Psalm goes on, “Come behold the works of the Lord, see what desolation he has brought on the earth.” I like the psalmist’s use of the word desolation here because I like how he gets a little snarky. We’ve had all these images of the effects of human desolation.

Nations in uproar, kingdoms tottering, even in our own time, the effects of climate change, roaring seas and trembling mountains. In comparison to the desolation we bring, here is what the desolation of God looks like. "He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth, he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire." Guys, the desolation of God is the desolation of human tools of destruction. God destroys the things we use to cause destruction.

Dear people of God, the world feels big and scary. It is big and scary. And things are unstable right now, they are. But guess what, every other time in human history that things have been hard and scary and uncertain, you know who else has been there. God. God has been there. God has always been, will always be, this strong, constant, stable presence in the midst of any and every uncertainty.

And God is not just a neutral strong, solid presence either. Because, I get it, God is solid is only so much good news. God is not just a strong, solid, presence, God is actively on our side, God is working to dismantle all the things we use to cause destruction. Which means, we don't have to put our trust in any of those things. Nothing, no one, can keep us safe, will keep us safe, loves us, cares about us, protects us, wants what's best for us and for all God's creation like God does. All those voices claiming they alone can save you, that keep not saving you, they are not God. God is God. And God is here.

I can't tell you how to vote in a few days, dear people of God. I can't legally tell you how to vote, that violates our 501c3 status. I can't morally tell you how to vote either, honestly

because I don't entirely know where all my votes are going yet. I have some ideas, I'm happy to have conversations with you on where I and the ELCA stand on a variety of issues, but none of those things will tell you how to vote. But I know you are smart and thoughtful and conscientious. You don't need me to tell you who to vote for, even if I wanted to or could.

And here's what else I know, the work that we are doing, thinking about candidates who fit our values, supporting causes that we care about, caring for our neighbor, loving our community, working for justice, advocating for the planet, I know all those things matter. I know they make a difference. I know God blesses them and us in working to bring about God's kingdom. Just as God has blessed God's people in doing God's work throughout all of time. Because no matter what time and what situation, "the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge." Thanks be to God. Amen.