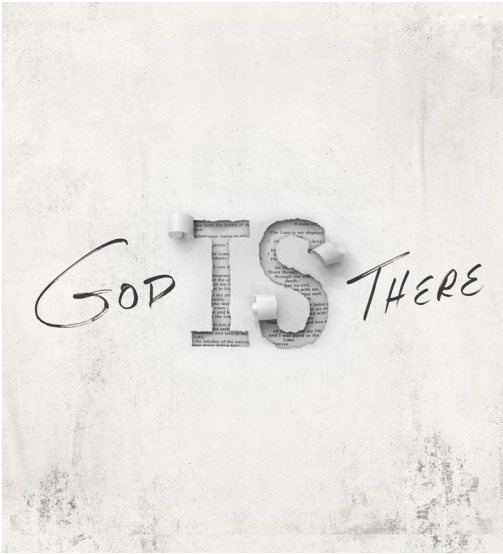




Sermon Growth Guide

July 16, 2023
When You're Afraid



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God Is There - When You're Afraid

Psalm 46

Key Verse: Psalm 46:1 "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."

Big Idea: God is ever present to me in my life.

Foundations

Psalm 46 provides a beautiful contrast. On the one hand, the psalmist describes external chaos taking place around him. First, there seems to be a crisis of nature, described in 46:2-3. What we read sounds a lot like an earthquake, and we know that these were common in ancient Palestine, caused by shifting continental plates in Africa and Asia.

As if that weren't enough to deal with, we also read of human conflict in 46:2-3. While we don't know when this psalm was written, "City of God" was a reference to Jerusalem, which was under attack at various times. The Psalmist's assertion that it wouldn't fall hints that there was some question about that.

Yet, amidst this chaos, we find a psalmist who's at peace. Rather than be knocked off balance by these external challenges and threats, the psalmist displays an internal calm. This person is visibly anchored in confidence that God is present and involved in these daunting circumstances.

This leads to multiple declarations: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." And "The Lord Almighty is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress."

Let's take a closer look at this psalm to better understand how it can encourage us in our own faith journey.

Understanding God's Word

Together, read Psalm 46. List each statement that the psalmist makes about God. When you put together all the dots of these statements, what conclusions about God's presence can you draw?

Have someone read aloud from 46:10: "Be still and know that I am God." Read it through multiple times, each time pausing to emphasize a different word in this sentence.

Applying God's Word

What fears have potential to grip your heart most easily?

Read John 14:27. How can we cultivate a greater awareness of Jesus's presence in our lives that enables us to experience His peace?

God invites us to "Be still and know that I am God." What might this look like in our lives, and how can you take to heart and live these words out this week?

Witnessing God's Word

Can you think of others who are currently experiencing external chaos? How can you allow the internal peace and calm that you experience from God's presence in your life to spill out in your interactions with them?

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It is a great privilege to be with all of you. I am so very thankful for this church and your ministry. Some of you know and some may not know how instrumental First Pres was in the formation of our denomination. I remember finishing the draft of our polity up in one of your conference rooms on November 7, 2012. You were the first large church into the denomination, and several in this congregation helped lay the foundation for this denomination. You really paved the way for now over 400 churches to follow suit and be part of our movement whether through churches transferring or being planted. I am thankful for your pastor, Tim, and his friendship and encouragement of me and for your whole staff as they lead you in God's calling.

I love this series through some of the psalms reminding us that God is there, even when—and maybe especially—when things aren't fair, or when we are depressed, or when we have messed up. And we are reminded today through Psalm 46 that **God Is There**, God is with us when we are afraid. Fear is huge in our nation. So much media, political campaigns and rhetoric are built around the tactic of instilling fear. We know that through the pandemic, fear and anxiety rose dramatically in our nation. It seems that fear is even more prevalent now than in the past. Some things we are afraid of but shouldn't be. I have three children; all three were in high school this year, but my oldest graduated and is heading to college at Baylor in Waco, Texas. My wife, Beth, is on a Facebook group with a bunch of parents, mostly moms, whose kids are going to be freshmen next semester. Beth calls it the anxious mom's Facebook group. While the group can be helpful, there is a lot of fear from the moms about the kids going to college.

One mom said, "My son is worried that there aren't going to be places on campus to fill up his water bottle." I am sure in this 20,000 student university in Waco, Texas, which is forecast to be over 100 today, I am sure they have figured out way to make sure people can stay hydrated. Another said, "My daughter is worried because she can't bring her taser into her all-girls dorm." Others panicked: "My kid didn't get their first housing choice" or "doesn't have a roommate" or "doesn't know where to park." All of these things are raising the fear temperature, and as my wife says, "It's all going to be fine, people."

But there are things that understandably cause us to fear. Chapman University did a

survey in 2022 on the top fears in America. Here are the percentage of people who said they were "Afraid" or "Very Afraid" of the following:

- 62% of people were afraid of corrupt government officials
- 60% of someone I love becoming seriously ill
- 56% of another world war
- 54% of not having enough money for the future.

Maybe reading these is raising your fear level right now. We've all probably seen some of these happen in our lives: loss of a job, serious illness for self or family, natural disasters. Colorado Springs, like Santa Barbara where I live, has had times of significant fires and I'm sure even when smaller fires occur, there is a heightened sense of fear caused by memories of previous fires.

How do we allow God's grace, goodness, and presence comfort us in the midst of fears? Let's solve that in next 20ish minutes. Fear will likely be a somewhat constant challenge for us, so lets allow Psalm 46 to speak to comfort to us. Psalm 46 is written by the sons of Korah. We all know who that is, right? OK, just kidding. Korah was a Levite priest who led the charge of about 250 people to rebel against Moses and Aaron's leadership after the Israelites were out of Egypt and traveling through the wilderness. Numbers 16:11 tells us that Korah's rebellion was actually against God. "Therefore it is against the Lord that you and all your company have gathered together. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?"

God told Moses to move the rest of the people away from Korah and his 250 followers. Then God told Moses what was going to happen and in verse 31-32 it says, "As soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods." (Numbers 16:31-32). The earth swallowed up Korah and all the complaining people that were against Moses. I have to admit I wished at times God would have done that with some of the negative people in my former congregation.

You would think the sons of Korah would be a negative reference, but there were decedents of Korah who had followed God rather than their father and the best we can tell these individuals were still priests but were mostly associated with writing music to the glory of God. So, when they say we are not to

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fear though the earth gives way, this is not hyperbole. They, or at least their lineage, saw the earth's capability of swallowing up people.

The encouragement of the psalm is wonderful: God is our refuge, our strength and a very present help in trouble. So much beautiful truth in that first verse. God is our refuge. He is the place we go to for protection and solace; He is our strength, to get us through those fear-producing moments. He is a VERY present help in trouble. Two important truths to note in that last phrase. First, is a reminder that we will still have trouble, that we will still face difficulty this side of heaven. While I think we know this truth intellectually, sometimes subconsciously when we have difficulty in our life we might think, "Why, Lord, is this happening to me if I follow and love you." But we are reminded multiple times in Scripture that following Jesus does not give us a free pass to be immune from trouble and difficulty. But the second truth of that statement is God remains very present with us in the midst of those trials and tribulations we face that would cause us to fear. God doesn't promise that we won't be afraid, but rather if we'll recognize and reach out to Him, that He will be VERY PRESENT with us.

It is easy to fall into the trap that God is just way out there, and certainly in the Old Testament before Christ and sending of the Holy Spirit, the Jewish faith could easily understand God as simply distant and transcendent, but several times in the OT we see the very real presence of God with His people and that is the promise here in Psalm 46. I believe the first step when we are afraid is to recognize that God hasn't abandoned us and instead seek His presence with us. And along with seeking His presence, we want to remember the power of His presence, the sufficiency of God's presence with us in the midst of fear.

I was flying home from Dallas last Thursday. I had an aisle seat and then there was an 8-year-old girl next to me and her father by the window. The little girl was afraid of the turbulence. And her dad said to her, "It's OK. I am here." And I said, "What good is that going to do her? Can you stop the plane from crashing?" Just kidding, I didn't say that (But I thought it). I was actually thinking about this passage and this message and it reminded me that it isn't just that God is present with us, like we have our favorite stuffed animal, it is because of who God is that His presence calms our fears.

Verse 4 says, "There is a river whose stream make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the most high." The people of God in His presence are often referred to as cities, and in the book of Revelation the collective people of God will dwell in the new Jerusalem, the new city of God.

Cities were strong when they had water supply. The bigger the water supply, the better. But we know that sometimes large water supplies can run over and cause flooding and destruction. And we see that imagery here in Psalm 46: "Though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, and though its waters roar and foam." This description of the water here is more gentle; here is a city that basically has a stream, an offshoot of a river and just this small bit of water can satisfy the whole city. This is symbolic for the power of God's satisfying presence in our lives. The image of water in Scripture is so prevalent and it points to the quenching that God gives for our deepest thirst. It makes sense that water would be used as it is the substance we need most. Right now I am tracking my water intake to try and drink a gallon a day because I know the benefits for my body. Certainly in Colorado Springs, you all know the importance of water at this altitude.

Psalm 42, another psalm by the sons of Korah, says, "As the deer pants for water so my soul longs after you." Jeremiah 2: the prophet says that the people have forsaken God the fount of living water. Jesus in John 4 says to the woman at the well that if you knew who I was you would ask me for a drink and I would give you living water and you would never thirst again. I love this image that Psalm 46 paints of the inhabitants of God being at peace, being joyful by the nourishment and thirst-quenching presence of God in the midst of a chaotic war-torn world that surrounds it. I pray and hope and long in my own life and in our churches that we would display and exhibit and manifest soul satisfying peace in the midst of everything that would normally cause fear.

Alexander MacLaren, a pastor in Scotland in the 1800s, said, "Faith, which is trust, and fear are opposite poles. If a man has the one, he can scarcely have the other in vigorous operation. He that has his trust set upon God does not need to dread anything except the weakening or the paralyzing of that trust." It makes me think of the options that we have before us when we are afraid. You no doubt

have heard of the flight or fight reaction to fear. A lot of times when we are afraid, we can “fight,” we can face the challenge head on, and there are some great things to doing that. One of the books I have been reading is the *The Confident Mind* by Dr. Nate Zinser. He was a professor at West Point (I realize I am saying that in *Air Force* country.) But he worked with cadets and then with high-performance athletes and coaches business professionals, and there is a big aspect in his work about taking and harnessing the feelings of fear and how that can fuel you to greater success. I love it; it is good stuff and it is very helpful in dealing with a lot of regular everyday situations where our fear might hold us back from bringing our very best. But that is not what God is calling us to do in this passage. He is not saying when we are afraid, you let that fear turn into fuel to conquer any obstacle before you.

But that can be our tendency. In fear we want to fight harder, we want to control what we can control in order to make us feel comfortable and stable. Basically, we want to be our own gods and if we can work hard to control the situation, then we think that will alleviate our fear.

The other reaction is flight—I want to run the other direction. And sometimes when we are afraid, we use different flight strategies to cope. We try to ignore that which is causing fear, we try to distract ourselves from the things that are causing us anxiety and fear. We can do seemingly innocuous things like watch TV, endlessly scroll through social media, play mindless games on our phone or whatever. We can also turn to food or alcohol or other more damaging things as a distraction to try to placate our fears.

But the Lord in this passage calls us not to fight or flight, but to faith. Verse 10 changes the tone and even the person that is speaking. The first nine verses are descriptions about who God is and what He does, written by the sons of Korah and then in verse 10 God Himself becomes the direct communicator where He say, “Be still and know that I am God (read in between the lines and know you are not!).” I don’t need you, says God, to fight and push through it and solve all of the challenges and alleviate your fears on your own. I am the One, says God, who causes wars to cease and to break the bow and shatter the spear. I don’t need you to do that. But I also don’t need you to run away to things other than me. You don’t need to distract yourself from earthly fears by

filling yourself with other earthly things that don’t truly satisfy. You don’t need to respond with fight or flight, but rather to respond with faith to be still and know that I am God.

Preaching this passage today is very providential. This whole series was set up in advance and initially I thought I was going to be here a different week, but then we had to change around our family vacation so I said I can do the 16th and this psalm was already chosen. But it is a psalm that had been very helpful for me in the past year.

Last February, I was diagnosed with leukemia. I hadn’t known there were different types of leukemia, so when I heard that word that I likely had leukemia, that was full anxiety and fear producing for me. The end of the story is that it is a kind of leukemia that is very treatable, and they don’t expect it to impact the longevity or quality of life. But there were a couple of weeks when I didn’t know what kind of leukemia it was—and it was tough. I was afraid and wondered, “Would my family be OK and taken care of?” My biggest fear was that my kids might get mad at God and have their faith shattered if this took my life. So, I went into fight mode and looked up all the different kinds of leukemia and got as much information as I could off the internet (not a smart move). And then a little bit of flight; how do I distract myself from this fear that is plaguing me?

And in the midst of my praying and worrying, it was this psalm and in particular verse 10 that became a centering psalm for me. Be still and know that I am God. It was as if God was saying to me, “Be still” and that all of the flurry of activity to try to fight and fix the situation isn’t going to help. Trying to distract myself with other things isn’t going going to work. It is only going to be the exercise of faith that comes from “being still” and knowing that He is God.

It is actually still my centering prayer—I pray it several times, or at least that is my desire and plan although it doesn’t always happen. But I say these words and pause and reflect and sometimes emphasize different aspects of the verse and allow it to feed my soul.

As we close and pray, I want to take you on that journey as well. I want to pray for whatever it is that could be causing your fear, and help allow God’s presence to give you peace.