

THEREFORE
Psalm 46:1-7

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
12 September 2021

We all learn, at some point in our lives, that the world is not a completely safe or predictable place. Some people learn it early, sometimes, sadly, in their own homes. Some of us are exposed to an event in our personal sphere. A house fire, a terrible car accident, a serious illness, an act of violence. It changes the way you look at the world from then on. Some events are particularly devastating because they hit close to home. For many of us, Flight 800 was a mysterious explosion, but one member of our church lost her brother in that disaster. What was it for you? Pearl Harbor? JFK's assassination...or one of the others that shortly followed in the 60's? For those in their 30's and 40's now, it was likely 9/11. An event that shook all of us to our core.

(PLAY VIDEO: <https://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/108712/our-prayer-for-911?id=motionworship&name=ourprayerfor911&creative=908&position=homepage>)

I remember being so surprised when I began planning worship for the Sunday after 9/11. I looked at the list of suggested scripture readings - the lectionary calendar rotates scriptures in a three-year cycle. The suggested Psalm for that day, determined long in advance, was Psalm 46. There couldn't be a more appropriate reading.

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

Therefore we will not fear...".

Verse 5 reads, "God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved. God will help it when the morning dawns. The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; God

utters God's voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge."

We understand the need for a refuge. The desire for a sanctuary. When the world feels unsafe, when we're overwhelmed, we want to be sheltered and protected.

The psalmist says, "God is our refuge. God is our shelter and protection." What that seems to mean is that God's very spirit provides shelter and protection for us. It doesn't mean that God takes us out of the difficult and challenging situation and lets us hide away. It doesn't mean that God builds a fortress for us so that no danger will ever come our way. That's not the kind of shelter and protection God provides. We may wish it sometimes. Most of us wish for it from time to time. But what God gives is something else. God gives us a solid place to stand, and the reassurance that we are not alone. All around us the world may seem unstable. People try to tell us what to do. Believe this, don't believe that. Your head can spin when you try to make sense of it all. But if you're standing on a firm foundation, you can maintain a sense of calm steadiness. God is our refuge.

When God is our refuge, we are not immune from life's difficulties. But we know we are not facing them alone, and we know that ultimately, we need not be afraid. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear. For, as the New Testament says, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." Nothing. Not natural disaster nor personal failure, nor a community tragedy nor an act of terrorism. Nothing.

God is our refuge AND God is our strength. Because we have the solid foundation of faith on which to stand, because we remember who we are and whose we are, we are given strength not just for ourselves but strength to help others.

As painful as it is to remember 9/11, it is heartening to remember all of the acts of courage on that day and for weeks to come. From the first responders who rushed into burning buildings, to the passengers who made the decision to bring down the plane at Shanksville, to those who later stood in solidarity with Muslim neighbors who were being harassed, we have seen story after story re-told this weekend, and we celebrate the best of the human spirit - selflessness, bravery, spending our lives for something greater than ourselves.

Now we begin to see that God knows what God is doing. If God just put us in a protective cave, away from danger, we'd be huddled in fear. It might be survival, but it isn't life. Instead, God keeps us right where we need to be, where we can make a difference for good, where we experience what the scriptures call "a life that really is life", abundant life.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear.

As I began thinking about this sermon, my mind went back not just to 9/11, but to so many events that have brought us together in prayer since then. I thought about Columbine and Sandy Hook and other incidents of mass violence. I thought about hurricanes and a tsunami, earthquakes and fires. In this room we have prayed for young children diagnosed with cancer and for other victims of disease. We know that the world is not a safe or predictable place.

We also know this. A robust spiritual life helps us live in this world. A robust spiritual life helps us not just survive but thrive in this world. It's hard to remember in weeks like this one, but what God wants for us is abundant life. God wants us to embrace the gift of life, in all of its sorrows AND joys. No matter how dire the news, how close tragedy comes, we are still called to be people who express joy and gratitude, people who remember how to laugh, people who really appreciate the beauty of the night sky, and the sunrise, and the great lake, and people who notice one another. God is our refuge and strength. Therefore, we will not fear. Instead, we will live fully.

Before I close this sermon, I want to call on my colleagues to share some words:
first Nate, then Beau: