

4 PENTECOST JULY 1/2, 201
 PSALM 46; LUKE 18:1-8

FIRST, MARSHALL
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God Is Our Refuge

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

God is our refuge and strength, says the Psalmist in our first reading for today... God is our refuge and strength...



What do those words mean to you?

For most of the decades I've been alive, the words *refuge and strength* have evoked for me images of **safety**... in the sense that refuge is a place of *safety*, a place that is absolutely secure, a place that is impossible to be breached.

It's **also** means having the political and financial means to assure that such safety is *more* than a **pipe dream**, *more* than a **wish-upon-a-star**, more than some **desperate hope** tied to a **coin** tossed in a **wishing-well**...

The picture of a fortress appears to accomplish both criteria: it's a place that appears to be permanently safe. Even the wealth needed to build it speaks of political power and financial security – an apt picture of refuge and strength.

And yet...Psalm 46 tells us that no such THING, PLACE, or CREATION of either NATURE or HUMANITY can even come close to matching the power that belongs to Almighty God.



Even those structures that seem built to last into eternity are, at the core, nothing more than ceilings, walls and floors. In the year 1842, Edgar Allen Poe wrote a short story entitled, Masque of the Red Death. In response to a terrible plague called the Red Death, a Prince by the name of Prospero invites a thousand other nobles to take refuge in a fortress to escape the terrible sickness. Indifferent to the sufferings of the population at large, these aristocrats intend to await the end of the plague in luxury and safety behind the walls of their secure refuge, having welded the doors shut.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Masque_of_the_Red_Death

Does anyone remember how the story ends? A fortress that may hold fast against cannon balls and bullets...**may** not be able to repel a tiny germ.

And there are other ways to render a fortress useless. Soon after the end of WWI, France devoted an amazing amount of money and effort to build what came to be called The Maginot Line along its border with Germany. A series of interconnected fortresses, believed to be unconquerable, they were created to halt a German advance long enough for the army to respond in force.

So at the beginning of WWII, Germany simply went **around** the Maginot line by invading the lowland countries of Belgium and the Netherlands. Said General George S. Patton, *Fixed fortifications are monuments to man's stupidity. If mountain ranges and oceans can be overcome, anything made by man can be overcome.* <https://historylist.wordpress.com/2008/03/12/the-walls-of-history/>

But here's the **PROBLEM** with us. We crave the guarantee of ***absolute refuge*** and ***unquestioned strength***...in our lives.

Political, financial, marital, parental – we want it all locked-up tight, safe and secure ***for us*** and for our ***loved*** ones... It's a longing that comes from deep within our psyche...**and** it's an ***upward spiral***...



Said the serpent to Adam and Eve as they were tempted to taste the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden – *You will be like God* – and we have never lost our taste for that elusive quest. It's a **curse** that keeps our heads *stuck in the clouds*, always on the lookout for something better:

- We want permanent solutions to our problems.
- We want a life that's free of pain.
- We want wealth, toys, more hair, less weight, hard bodies, soft water, high yields, low fat, straight teeth, perfect vision - the list goes on and on.

This stems, we all know, from a dis-quiet in our souls that prevents us from embracing the ordinary, that keeps us discontented with...the average, that pushes us to become bored with... what we have, and fills us with an impatient urge to grasp what we can't or shouldn't have.

There's a great story about this human fault in the O.T. book of Numbers, chapter 21. The Israelites have been eating *manna* in the wilderness – a mysterious food provided by God that keeps them alive as they wander through the desert. At first, these former slaves are very THANKFUL to have ANYTHING to eat... Yet before too long they start complaining... In fact, they eventually band together in an outright rebellion against Moses and God.

Says the book of Numbers (21:5): *The people spoke against God and against Moses (saying), Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food!*

What was once their salvation, truly a gift from heaven to keep the people alive, is now accursed, hated, despised...such is the struggle of human nature... In the bible story, God responds like an angry parent and punishes the grumblers for a time... but then he offers the people a way out of their troubles.

And there's a hint of that emotion here in Psalm 46. Through nine verses, the Psalmist praises God's blessing, a gift of assurance that nothing made in nature, nor by the hands of human beings, can ever compare with the power of God to keep us safe and secure.

The Lord, we're told, is infinitely stronger than any human invention or force of nature. Mountains, fortresses, oceans, armies – nothing even comes close to matching the strength of the Almighty. In fact, the most fearsome powers of nature and humanity are mere playthings for God's pleasure or kindling for God's campfire...

And then we come to v. 10. Says the Lord, with what seems to be a rather large dose of parental prerogative: **BE STILL!!**



Be still, commands the Lord, ***and know that I am God!***

To any who would question the Lord's authority – ***Be still*** is a fearsome challenge, a warning shot, an admonition for all:

- who seek to dominate their neighbors
- who seek to elevate themselves
- who clamor after power, fame and wealth
- who trample the last, the lost, the least, and the lowly.

It is a stinging rebuke of all pretenders to the throne of heaven, and to the myriad voices who clamor for the seat of supremacy in our hearts.

And yet, at the same time, this call is also a beautiful invitation to come home, to let go and let God, to say no to death and yes to life, to say no to sin and yes to grace:

- to reject all that keeps us away from God,
- to reject all that keeps us imprisoned by our ego,
- to reject all that keeps us delighting in sin,
- to reject all that keeps us afraid to speak up,
- to reject all that keeps us listening to any voice other than the one belonging to the God who truly cares about us, who truly loves us, who truly wants the best ***for us*** – AND – the best ***from*** us – for the sake of others!!

For it's only when we are ***still*** (quiet, content, open, attentive, self-less) that we can be filled with the good food of God's grace... ***Be still***, commands the Lord, ***and know that I am God!***

So, where or when do you find it possible to *be still*...and **know** that **the Lord** is *God*?

For me, there is one place *where*, and one time *when* I'm best able to be still before God. The **place** is where our high school youth will be heading in a couple of weeks – Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp near Kalispell, MT. Nestled in the mountains, it's always been an amazing place for me to re-connect with God and re-charge spiritually, a place where I can truly be still.



And yet, even in that holy space...I'm reminded that God does not live in the mountains, for mountains, as beautiful as they may be, can, as the psalmist says, *shake in the heart of the sea*...

And the campfire, as beautiful as it is, reminds me of God's plan to burn all weapons with fire. Again, both the power of NATURE and the power of HUMANITY are temporary, fleeting, passing through the ages of time.

So, it really comes down to the issue of WHEN it is that I'm most able to *be still and know that the Lord is God...*

And that miracle takes place for me whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper. It's ironic to witness the power of this meal that stands in direct contrast to its astounding simplicity.



Through a bit of bread and a sip of wine and some beautifully simple words, God is able to forgive sins, to give us life, to strengthen us when we're weak, to humble us when we're proud, to pull our heads out of the clouds and place our feet firmly on the ground, to help us let go of our desire to be like God, and embrace, instead, God's call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

This is the time, this is the manner, this is the place in which God speaks to us in the only way that makes sense to our souls. We are here, we are still, we are open to being fed by Almighty God NOT with some super food that will change us into super humans, but with the bread of life and the wine of forgiveness that will always help us be...simply human.

Be still, says the Lord, and know that I am God...

Take and eat...this is my body...

Take and drink...this is my blood...given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins...

Be still and know that I am God...

The Lord of hosts is with us...the God of Jacob is our refuge. Amen.