

Jerusalem Corners

Psalm 46; Isaiah 26:1-12

Perhaps one of the earliest books of the New Testament was not a gospel at all, but a letter Paul wrote early, early on to a congregation in a place called Galatia, in what is now south central Turkey. Strangely, the Christians Paul wrote to were Greek speaking Celts, people who might have come to Europe looking for Ireland, but they lost their way and ended up among the Greeks.

But wherever they came from and wherever they were headed, they didn't know much Bible when they first learned that Jesus had died for their sins and risen to give them eternal life. So Paul taught them to trust Jesus, to give their lives to Christ and depend on him for the forgiveness and guidance and help they needed day by day. And with that gospel, they did well until some rabbi's arrived in their city and began to teach them that trusting Jesus wasn't going to be enough.

Paul had sold them short, the rabbi's told them. If they wanted to stay close to God, if they wanted lives that made sense, they were going to have to learn and follow the rituals, the diet, the seasons and rhythms that Moses had taught and Israel had followed all the centuries they had waited for Christ to come.

So these young, new Christian disciples gave the kosher life a try, thinking that maybe they might do better. Maybe being kosher, having practical techniques, making practical changes might bring them closer to God than Paul's less tangible, less visible, more abstract gospel had been able to do.

When he heard about this, Paul was aghast! An ex-rabbi himself, Paul knew that no number of self improvements would do for peoples' hearts and minds what Christ could do, if only we would believe that an invisible person could live in our hearts, if only we would trust him to forgive us and learn his gospel and depend on his Spirit to change us so that over time we could learn from Christ together the sort of love and the kind of relationships that change people from the inside out.

But the tricky part of Paul's letter was that, strictly speaking, reading Moses and learning commandments and understanding kosher wasn't wrong. In fact, knowing the ethics Moses commanded and the rituals he taught and the stories of how old Israel was chosen and led and helped by God is a necessary part of making any sense of who Jesus is and what he came here to do.

So in Galatians, chapter 4, verse 3, Paul called the rituals and the diet and the sacrifices and the calendar of old Israel the “*elemental things*”, he said. By which Paul meant that all these rituals Moses taught were a sort of sacred alphabet, a big picture book God gave his people so that when Jesus came, his Cross and his Resurrection and the Gospel he taught would make some sense.

And I’m telling you all this because our Call to Worship, Psalm 46 is a song full of pictures, sort of a sacred slide show, that won’t make sense to us unless we learn the alphabet and see what the pictures mean for us here and now. Psalm 46 was written by the sons of Korah. These were a clan of Levites, people who were set apart by Moses and Aaron to lead old Israel in worship in the old tabernacle.

Now this song was probably written much later, after David and Solomon, because in it they sing, not about the old tabernacle, but about “*the city of God*” where no one worshiped until David brought the ark and Solomon built the temple in the holy city. So Psalm 46 opens with us singing what amounts to an abstract fact: “*God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble.*”

The simple gospel fact being that wherever we are, God is there, “*very present*” the Bible says. And not passive either, not uninvolved. Paul would write to the Christians in Rome hundreds of years later and hundreds of miles away, not to worry. “*If God is for us,*” Paul said, “*who can stand against us! ...For I am certain that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

The point being that it is those abstract, invisible facts we learn and believe about God that will save us, not what we do, not how smart and agile and capable we are in the face of trouble. And as if to underline that reality, the second verse of the psalm sings to us a about catastrophe: “*Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way and the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea...*” The picture here is of a tsunami, a mountainous wall of water, the sort of flood that few people have experienced since the days of Noah, and yet in our lifetime it has happened often enough that the images are hard to force from our minds once we’ve seen and remember them.

And the point here is not that faith in God primarily comes to play in natural disasters. Rather the psalm sings that life can engulf us, our sins, other peoples’ sins, physical illness, personal tragedy, it can all become bigger than us and the psalm reminds us that, when it does, God is there and God is for us. Which sometimes can be small comfort in the short run, but ultimately, eternally, God can see us through things entirely beyond what we can manage. Even when we fail, we are still his and God can heal what we can’t mend. Very likely, the tsunami pictured here in this psalm was geopolitical

By the time the sons of Korah sang Psalm 46, Israel likely was in a world of trouble. The Promised Land seemed to God's people like a tiny, little oasis surrounded and outnumbered by great pagan empires that routinely invaded and terrified God's people whenever they saw the slightest sign of weakness. So the prophets began singing about their holy city as an island, subject to the wind and storms and tides generated by an ocean of unbelieving enemies living all around them.

So it's no accident that Bible prophecy is filled with pictures of beasts rising out of stormy seas, seeking to pull God's people down into the waves and tides of a world without God and truth, worship and commandments, marriage and family, rhyme and reason, law and order. This, I think, is what Jesus was getting at in Luke's gospel when he said about the last days, *"There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and, on earth, distress...nations in perplexity because of the roaring... sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and foreboding about what is coming on the world..."*

I don't think that Jesus was saying that the Second Coming is going to be a waterfront event, that the nations will be terrified because the surf is up. I think Jesus is echoing the pictures in this psalm and the visions in Daniel and foreshadowing the visions of John in Revelation that, before the end, nations and tyrants will gain a degree of power and fall to a level of lawlessness that will be truly terrifying as human history boils in toward Judgment Day. And when that happens we will need to remember that, if we stick with him, God is there and able to help and entirely for us.

So our psalm sings: *"The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."* And, with that in mind, the picture immediately changes to something calm and peaceful and uplifting: *"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling place of God Most High."*

So beyond the reach of the terrifying tides and waves of an unbelieving world, Jerusalem had been built as a citadel where God lived and could be worshiped. And strangely on the hilltop, under the city was a system of underground aquifers which flowed invisibly, under the streets to one pool after the other, providing God's people and his sanctuary with an inexhaustible supply of cool, fresh water.

And this too generated a number of Old Testament pictures that directly apply to Christ and to us. David taught us last week in Psalm 110 that the Lord and Priest David saw in his night vision, Christ, would march with a vast army of saints past a brook whose water would keep him refreshed through the last days and into eternity. And I said last week that in John, chapter 4, Jesus remembered Psalm 110 when he told the woman at the well, *"If you knew the gift of God and who it was who is saying... 'Give me a drink.' You'd have asked and he'd have given you living water...The water I give.. will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life..."*

And from there Jesus and the Samaritan woman got into a debate about where was the true holy city and where people should worship God. And Jesus said to her, *“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...the hour is coming and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth...”*.

Later in John’s gospel, in chapter 7, in Jerusalem, at the Feast of Tabernacles, Leon Morris tells us that the priests led a daily parade from one of the pools to the altar where fresh, cool water was poured on the red hot coals, resulting in a swirling cloud of steam and smoke that billowed out of the sanctuary into the air over God’s people. And Morris thinks that, *“on the last day of the feast”*, Jesus stood under the cloud of steam and smoke and cried out, *“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow living water.’”* In the gospel, John explains, *“Now he said this about the Spirit...”*.

But Jesus does not make a personal appearance in Psalm 46 as he did in David’s night vision in Psalm 110, because the focus on this page of God’s picture book is less on Christ personally and more on us. Let me explain what I mean. In John’s gospel, Jesus is described and he says himself that he is the Light of the World. Of course he is! As God’s only begotten human Son, Christ is the source of any light that might reach and change our fallen hearts. Light starts with Christ.

But it doesn’t end with him. Because in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, *“You are the light of the world.”* And then he went on to say, *“A city set on a hill cannot be hidden...”*. All the Old Testament pictures of God’s presence and beauty and power could be seen in the sanctuary city where he was worshiped; in the candelabra which was lit night and day, reflecting off walls plated with gold; in the smoke and steam that swirled off the altar when water from the river under the city was poured out for all God’s people to see. *“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling place of the Most High.”* our psalm sings to us.

So the question becomes, *“Where is the city of God today?”* And we don’t need to wonder because Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount. We, the Church, are the city set on a hill. It is among us, when we gather and worship and serve him together that his Spirit, a river from God, flows make us glad and remind us that in all our challenges and heartbreak God is with us and for us. The church is the place where we learn to love and know God. There is no other place. So our psalm sings, *“God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.”*

What morning? Judgment Day. Our psalm teaches us: “*The nations rage, the kingdoms totter God lifts his voice and the earth melts.*” Kingdom has always risen against kingdom, nation against nation. There have always been earthquakes and famines, trouble and turmoil, heartbreak and tragedy, and it will get worse as the Judgment day draws near. But Jesus taught his disciples, “*See that you are not alarmed!*”.

And Psalm 46 teaches us that, if we live in God’s city, if we are faithful to the church, we are not alone, “*The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*” In the Psalms and prophets, we are invited to study the city of God as a picture of the relationship that is supposed to exist between God and his people, the Church. Last year, the banner we hung on the front of this sanctuary sang from Psalm 125, “*As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people, now and forever.*”

The point being that old Jerusalem was an “*elemental thing*”, a picture looking forward to something bigger and better and more real. Old Jerusalem was a single dandelion seed puff that God blew to the winds as the smoke and steam swirled out of the old sanctuary and landed on the disciples of Jesus that first Pentecost Sunday. Now we are the city on a hill, God’s holy dwelling place where a river runs to make us glad. That’s why the place where we worship is known by our neighbors as Jerusalem Corners. In Derby, we love and know and serve God here, together.