

## *Know That I Am God*

Psalm 46; Hebrews 2.14-15

9.11.11

### **Psalm 46**

God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble. <sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; <sup>3</sup> Though its waters roar *and* foam, Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah. <sup>4</sup> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, The holy dwelling places of the Most High. <sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. <sup>6</sup> The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered; He raised His voice, the earth melted. <sup>7</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah. <sup>8</sup> Come, behold the works of the LORD, Who has wrought desolations in the earth. <sup>9</sup> He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariots with fire. <sup>10</sup> "Cease *striving* and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." <sup>11</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.

### **Hebrews 2.14-15**

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

Today, is, of course, the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Attacks against the U.S., September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. To say that, *since that time*, "this is a different world", would be a gross understatement. A lot has changed.

I can't even *begin* to *trace* all the things that have changed since that fateful day. People wondered in the days following the attacks: "What is this religion that they claim inspired these attacks?" Most Westerners and church-goers knew very little about Islam and the 1.5 billion Muslims in the world (*there was a time when American churches were sending more missionaries to Alaska {around 500,000 total population} than to the whole Muslim world combined*). That has changed.

A lot has changed. The way we travel and think. Some estimates say that the total cost of the attacks, all things combined now exceeds one trillion dollars. Gasoline was selling for an average of \$1.66 a gallon on 9.11.01 and today it's at nearly \$4.00. We've been engaged in two wars.

We're living in a period characterized by rapid change and uncertainty. Since the attacks, though perhaps not *directly* related, we are facing a global economic recession. And, whether related to the attacks or not, I haven't even mentioned the moral, ethical and religious changes that are sweeping across the West and this nation...things our grandparents would never have conceived. The ethical, ideological, spiritual landscape is changing. There's a "new normal" that doesn't *feel* normal at all.

Maybe the biggest thing (for Americans) is a sense of shaken-ness, a sense of insecurity ... WE SAW the unthinkable actually happen right on our television screens. I remember right where I was when I first heard about it. I almost guarantee that you (if you are over the age of say 15) *YOU* remember where you were.

*Very deliberately chosen* symbols of this nation's security and of its economic power were the targets. We all said it as we watched those towers fall: "I can't believe this is happening" ...we SAW the unimaginable HAPPEN.

This 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm is about *that* very subject: what do we do when the things we count on suddenly change? ...when the unimaginable actually takes place? How do we grapple with sudden loss of control and a *WAVE* of uncertainty... "when all around my soul gives way"?

Look, I don't have to tell you: these are uncertain times, these are "the times that try men's souls" (Thomas Paine) and people can find plenty of reasons to be afraid, to feel insecure. The things we thought we could count on institutions, moral consensus, national security – we have seen what we thought was unshakable...to shake and fall...we have seen mountains fall into the sea.

Today's sermon starts as a dark topic but (I think you'll see...) has a bright conclusion – I want to think about :

#1 – Facing Uncertainty

#2 – The Attributes and Actions of God

#3 – The Path to Gladness in the Midst of Changing World

This Psalm wants us to think about the unthinkable. The writer of this song is urging us to go to where we don't WANT to go (so a little warning here – this part of the sermon won't be pretty or pleasant). There are things you are banking on and that will, just looking at "the odds" (as we say) that will under normal circumstances that will very likely happen.(James 4.13) Your spouse will remain faithful to you. Your children will graduate from High School. Your job will continue

to provide a source of satisfaction to you and income for you and your family. Social Security will remain...secure and will make a good return on your investment. Your car will carry you safely home after this church service. You will be able to take your next breath and your heart will continue to beat...

Don't worry ...you took that breath and your heart didn't miss a beat...and all of these probable occurrences will...probably occur... same as it ever was ...same as it ever was.

But we also know that we live in a world that is not the way it's supposed to be. Sometimes what is very likely to happen, doesn't. Heartbeats lose their normal rhythm. Automobiles collide. Investments and securities...turn out to be not so secure. Children are born with birth defects and disabilities. Young people die. Governments tumble...dictators refuse to let go of power and war against their own people...earthquakes...tsunamis...hurricanes...violence.

Commercial jet-liners fly into buildings. MOUNTAINS – the very symbols of permanence and stability and immovability – MOUNTAINS fall into the sea. The unlikely...the unthinkable happens.

*“though the earth should change...the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; ...its waters roar and foam ... the mountains quake at its swelling pride... The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered... desolations... wars”*

These are all symbols of the unthinkable. What is it for you? What's the thing that if you lost it would make life not worth living? It's not likely to happen...maybe about as likely as a mountain falling into the sea...but sometimes things change ...Sometimes the unlikely, the uncontrollable, the unthinkable does happen...sometimes mountains fall into the heart of the sea.

It's not fun to think about this...to muse on our fears and anxieties and phobias. In George Orwell's book *1984*, the government (Big Brother) watches every citizen's every move and is able to analyze all the data and to determine what is each individual's greatest fear. For the main character Winston Smith...it's rodents.

What's yours? If that thing you so greatly fear should come to pass...what would happen to you emotionally...inwardly...if the unthinkable happened (if your stable mountain fell into the sea) how would it affect you?

The writer of our second passage brings all these fears/phobias together into one phrase and makes all our problems somehow stem from our fear of death. And we are all labeled “those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.”

In other words, what ruins life for us ...what enslaves us...is the fear of death. You may think it's a fear of losing your retirement account or fear of divorce or uncertainty about your children's future...or a dread of disease or dementia or unemployment or failure or not getting married...*they're all just different shapes of the same clay...different forms of the fear of death - the uncontrollable and inescapable enemy.*

And in this Psalm, the writer combats this fear of change, fear of the unthinkable, fear of death by turning our minds and hearts in the direction of God. He wants us to muse on how God IS (His qualities/attributes) AND on what God DOES.

On one side, he stacks up all these symbols of power, all the forces we can't control, trouble (v.1), earth changing (I thought about climate change), earthquakes, mountains, oceans and rivers surging and swelling (and nothing can be done... We've all seen it this summer in the US...sandbags! We're all sophisticated and high-tech and when it comes to swollen rivers and storm-surge...sandbags? Really? That's all we got!), and more symbols: nations in uproar (Libya has a civil war... the world oil market freaks out!), kingdoms totter... All the things we hope won't get us! Symbols of powerful trouble (I counted 19 such symbols in this short Psalm!)

And against all these forces – the stuff we can't control – the things that make us fear death and keep us captive – in contrast the poet calls us to muse on God: He is a refuge, a strength, a help, the Most High, with us, a stronghold, with us (repeated) a stronghold (repeated). He is in control of all these forces – they belong to Him. They are superior to us but infinitely inferior to Him. “Lord Sab-a-oth is He”, i.e Lord of hosts, Lord of heaven's armies; the God of Jacob who wrestles with us and vanquishes us.

And not only what He IS but what He *DOES*. HIS is the Invisible Hand that is somehow moving world events and moving all forces to accomplish His good ends. He is dwelling with His people, His church. He is in the midst of her. He will help. He will raise His voice and all the forces must obey. He fashioned the desolations and uses them like a sculptor uses a hammer and chisel to bring beauty out of the block of stone. He makes wars to cease – war is ultimately under His control. Our weapons whether sandbags or spears or chariots or tanks or planes or nuclear weapons... are under His dominion.

And He has a plan – to reveal Himself – to display Ultimate Beauty, Truth and Goodness to this seemingly chaotic and unpredictable world. He will display who He is; all the forces and symbols of power and prideful nations will bow to Him “I am God and I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” That’s the plan.

And from our perspective we see: God stepped into time and space ... IN the Person of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate God. He came into the midst of her – His own people. He became her help. God exalted Himself over the powers – He raised His voice and nature obeyed. The surging sea and the winds/skies obeyed His voice, “Peace, be still”. He spoke to sickness and blindness and disability and the forces of death obeyed Him. “Lazarus! Come forth!”

In Jesus Christ, the Most High spoke to spiritual powers and evil and they melted before Him. *He forgave sin* as only the One against Whom those sins had been committed *could do*.

The God of Jacob revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, a refuge and a help and the mighty fortress to the poor and oppressed...and He EVEN went to the root of the whole problem, *to the power of death itself*. He put an end to THE WAR OF ALL WARS – the revolt of man against God and the justice of God against our rebellion. In Jesus Christ God settles the score!

He undid death. And to do that...He had to share in our plight...had to become for a moment, like us and then succumb to our great enemy, the thing we all fear: death.

In a 1993 movie called *Fearless*, Jeff Bridges plays a passenger in a plane crash. He’s one of a handful of survivors. And in the moment right before the crash he is certain he will die...but he doesn’t. And following that crash, *HE LOSES ALL FEAR*. He’s no longer afraid to tell the truth. He’s not afraid of failure or rejection or loss. He entered into the thing we all fear...stared death in the eye and death lost its power over him.

AND he also becomes unafraid to smash his car into a wall or to jump off a high building AND people can’t stand to be around him...he’s horribly offensive.

The movie is *ON* to something – death can only be defeated by entering in to it... and only God could do that and live to tell about it! And God gives His victory over death to everyone who *comes to Him in trust*.

The way this Psalm pictures this (*coming to God in trust*) is by these two imperatives in v. 8 and v. 10 “*Come, behold the works of the LORD*” and “*Be still and know that I am God.*” These

commands invite us into the great victory. They invite us into the refuge that the death of Jesus Christ is. Only by entering in can death lose its power over us.

God is bidding us to do something like what Jeff Bridges did in that movie – to stare down the powers and that final power of death. He invites us to see His work – how in the Cross, He took what I deserved, “Come, behold the works of the LORD” but more than just admiring it to then enter into it.

The word “behold” is often used of prophetic visions! Get a moving experiential look at this! History’s greatest desolation – the death of Jesus Christ is God’s doing...is God giving us refuge.

He calls me and invites me to experience it and to rest in it, “I am a big sinner and that’s why I’m afraid to die...but God, in Jesus Christ, took my big sin and guilt...He took my punishment (the Hell I deserved). When He died, I died with Him, I died IN Him...He was actually representing me. And now I hear His voice, ‘Be still and know that I am God.’”

See? The Path to Gladness in the Midst of a Changing World is one that passes through death. It’s coming to this death again and again by faith, “Come, behold the works of the LORD” and “Be still and know that I am God”...I am not afraid of death because I have already died (Crucified with Christ) and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. (Gal 2.20)

But unlike the Jeff Bridges character, this does not lead to recklessness but gladness...in fact the raging sea becomes a stream of gladness, a river of grace, *“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, The holy dwelling places of the Most High.”*

I can look at the possibility of bad stuff happening like unemployment or loss of health or even the unthinkable bad stuff that happens to Christians and non-Christians alike...and I’m not glib about it or syrupy or cocky...I still cry in this broken world...but underneath it all, like water flowing underground, a river of gladness. I am released from the slavish fear of death – Christ has died and I in Him. I will glory in my Redeemer and make my boast in Him.