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Psalm 46, Hebrews 11:29-12:2
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“What Faith Can Do”

In the 46th Psalm, the psalmist declares, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” There is no river in Jerusalem. What was the psalmist thinking? In fact, over the centuries, Jerusalem constantly faced the danger of losing its water supply, not having enough water for the needs of a growing population and protecting its water sources in times of war. In a dry geography, water is more precious than gold.

When I was in Turkey this summer, I saw a news article about a 2700 year old stone tablet describing an ancient engineering feat in Jerusalem. During the reign of King Hezekiah, the king knew how vulnerable the city would be during a siege if he did not protect its water source. Therefore, the king built a tunnel the length of almost 6 football fields, from the spring of Gihon outside of the city walls, to the pool of Siloam within the city. Later, when the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem, the city did not fall because it had abundant water. This tablet was discovered in the late 19th century during the Ottoman Empire and was placed in the Ottoman museum in Istanbul. Now, the Israeli government is negotiating to get the stone back.

Surely the psalmist was not thinking about the spring of Gihon and the underground aqueduct that led to the pool of Siloam. The language of the psalm imagines something greater than this! “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” So, let us look at the psalm to see if we might discover this mighty river of God.

The opening words of the psalm, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, therefore we will not fear,” served as the inspiration of Luther’s great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. What is there to fear? The psalmist imagines the mountains collapsing, the earth trembling and the seas whirling in uproar. Having witnessed the eruption of Mount St. Helens, the flooding of New Orleans, the tsunami in South Asia and earthquakes in Peru, Turkey, Japan, we too can imagine how the created order itself can return to chaos. The effects of global warming are all around us. Species become extinct; storms become more violent; massive chunks of the ice shelf crack, drift away and melt. This past week a member of the church showed me pictures of two identical spots in Alaska. The first pictures were taken twenty years ago and the second pictures were taken this summer. At both sites, the pictures clearly show the melting of the glaciers and the retreat of the ice over the past twenty years.

What is there to fear? Perhaps the psalmist wrote these words when the city of Jerusalem was under siege. Or, perhaps, the psalmist had returned from war and was reflecting upon the uproar of the nations and the rise and fall of kingdoms. We do not know. We do know that the psalmist was contemplating the devastations of history. We fear not only the destructive power of nature; we also fear the destructive power of human beings and human societies.

In his history of the Victorian period in Great Britain, author A. N. Wilson concludes that 19th and early 20th century British imperialism was fueled by avarice, pride, self-deception and delusions of grandeur. Many of the post-colonial struggles in Africa and the Middle East may be attributed to the British conviction that there was almost a moral imperative to control the world. The colonialist, Cecil Rhodes, whose ambitions changed the course of history in southern Africa, wrote, “If we had retained America there would ... be millions more of English living...Since we are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race.” (quoted in *The Victorians*, p. 603)

One could argue that not much has changed from the day of the psalmist to the time of the European colonialists and to our own day. If we amass enough power as human beings, we seem to have an almost limitless capacity to deceive ourselves about our own greatness and to be blind to the harm we do in imposing our own will on others. Now we fear terrorism, social anarchy and random violence. If we allow our fear to control us and lead us, we may destroy more good than the evil

we are able to overcome.

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God!” What is this river? The psalmist cast an eye on the horizon and looked for the work of God. The psalmist envisioned the end of human conflicts and the destruction of war itself:

“Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought upon the earth.
The Lord makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shield with fire.” (46:8, 9)

The psalmist knew that the future is in the hands of the God who makes all conflict cease. The psalmist was sustained by the river of God’s powerful presence.

We are so caught up in the present that we cannot see it. The psalm invites us to step back from our current struggle, to put our fear into abeyance and to pause long enough to discover the God of the future in the midst of the present: “Be still and know that I am God.” We catch our breath; or, maybe, we breathe deeply for the first time in a long while. We breathe in the deep peace of God. We realize that underneath the struggle and the conflict is God. God is the sure foundation of our lives. Martin Luther wrote, “And though this world with devils filled, Should threaten to undo us, We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us.” (*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, verse 3) “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God!” It is the river of God’s Spirit at work in the world and in our lives. Faith in God casts out fear and gives us courage. You cannot build an abundant life on fear; fear won’t generate a safer world or create a more peaceful community. A writer noted that the psalm opens us up to “the inward assurance that flows from [our] total surrender to God.” (p. 374, *The Psalms*, Artur Weiser) When we cease our anxious striving and silence our fearful hearts, we find God in the stillness.

I have seen that faith triumph in an emergency room filled with noises, swift-moving feet, distressed families, beeping equipment and sick, hurting patients. One night, I received word that a church member had suffered a massive heart attack. I went to the hospital and found his wife of over forty years with him. He was connected to what seemed to be countless machines and tubes. Knowing how they had lived their lives together as partners at home, in the community and in the church, I did not know how she would face this serious and frightening situation. Tears flowed, but she had a calm spirit. In the midst of the chaos, she found the stillness that leads to God. She found the river whose streams make glad the people of God.

The letter to the Hebrews tells us how such faith in God has empowered the witness of God’s people throughout the ages. In Hebrews 11, we hear what has been known as “the roll call” of the faithful cloud of witnesses: Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, to name a few. Then, the author goes on to tell us what faith can do – endure floggings, overcome evil, handle deprivation, administer justice and even face death with assurance. The author of Hebrews tells us that we can look to Jesus, whose life shows us the power of faith to endure all things and to triumph over all things. He is pioneer and perfecter of our faith; he paves the way for us and guarantees that we will complete what God has for us to do. There is a river whose streams sustain the people of God.

In the first decades of the 5th century, St. Augustine was the Bishop of Hippo, a Roman city in North Africa. Near the end of his life, he witnessed the last days of the Western Roman Empire. He saw cities sacked, estates ruined, churches burned, villages pillaged and people slaughtered. In his letters, he urged his fellow bishops to remain faithful to their flocks and to their God. He knew that empires come and go; but the city of God endures forever. In his last days, he was comforted by the saying of the philosopher Plotinus, “He is no great man who thinks it a great thing that sticks and stones should fall...” (p. 425, *Augustine of Hippo*, Peter Brown) Augustine had his eye on the God who makes war cease to the ends of the earth and whose kingdom is forever.

Faith in God can lead us to deep peace and to a bold witness for Christ. Faith is leading one of our own young adult

members, Mo Wilson. to give a year as a volunteer in mission in Northern Ireland, a country that has known centuries of conflict. She will go as a witness to the powerful presence of God in the midst of the turmoil of human life. As our schools begin a new year, faith can lead us to be bold witnesses to the peace of Christ in our schools. With all of the challenges that we face in our schools, it would be easy to give up. Faith leads us to pray for our schools, volunteer in our schools and support our schools. This year, faith has led you to provide over 350 book bags filled with school supplies for children and youth whose families cannot provide these supplies. These book bags say someone cares about them and someone prays for them. This year, in an effort to create a positive learning environment in our schools, IPS is requiring its students to wear uniforms. You may not know that we are providing 200 uniforms at IPS schools 14 and 15 for those students who cannot afford them. The gift of uniforms says that somebody cares about them and somebody prays for them. This year, we will begin the first class of a free pre-school at Westminster Neighborhood Ministries. We have a new classroom; we are constructing a new playground where a crack house once stood. This pre-school and this playground say somebody cares about these children and somebody is praying for them.

Faith can lift our despair and distress and give us peace and hope. Faith can move God's people out of fear into the world to witness to God. Don't let anybody ever tell you there is no river in Jerusalem! Wherever God's people gather, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God! It is the river of faith in the powerful presence of the Lord.