

Good evening everyone! And welcome to our second Mt. Zion-line worship video resource! I hope you enjoyed the first part of the Holden Evening Prayer liturgy, performed by some of our very talented musicians at Mt. Zion. If you haven't watched the "Part 1" video of the Holden Evening Prayer yet, I would encourage you to go back and watch it! And once my sermon and scripture video here is complete, I would encourage you to watch the "Part 2" video to close out our worship experience this evening.

For these next few weeks in Lent, our Wednesday worship experience will be joining together with this Holden Evening Prayer Part 1 video, I will come in with a new sermon and scripture video each week, and then join back together and close out our worship with this Holden Evening Prayer Part 2 video.

Thank you all again for your continued flexibility during this time.

Given the extraordinary circumstances in which we find ourselves, we are all having to do life differently than we ever imagined, life completely different than what it was even just a week ago, when I was able to worship with all of you here in this sanctuary space. Due to all this doing life differently, worship and preaching are, of course, going to look a bit differently too.

So instead of continuing on with the "Return to the Lord your God" refrain for our Lenten theme, I will be preaching on a variety of topics related to our current, unprecedented pandemic situation. I will use a combination of lectionary texts and ones that the Spirit leads me and others to in this time. And I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart may be pleasing to our holy creator and comforter, God.

Tonight I invite you to join me in pondering Psalm 46.

Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
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;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Whenever anyone asks me for scripture to help bring comfort, the first place I always guide them is to the Psalms. The Psalms are unique in that they are written by people, from the human perspective of how God is at work in their world and among them. The Psalms are a collection of songs and poems written by the Hebrew people over time and compiled together in this collection. You could call it an early hymnal, I suppose.

But it's the way the authors of the Psalms talk about God that leads me back to them over and over again. It's all about their relationship with God, they use imagery to describe feelings and the actions of God. The Psalms leave no stone unturned in terms of the human experience. There are psalms of pure joy and praise, and psalms of lament and torment. Psalms to celebrate holy festivals and plenty of psalms of trust that God will guide us forward.

In Psalm 46, which I read today, the author must have really been through the ringer to bring about this powerful image of how God has worked in their life. The author has experienced the tumult and violence of creation, the rushing storms and great mountaintops that incite the sense of overwhelm in us.

And the author has faced the violence of warfare, the destruction that comes from leaders fighting one another and lives taken away by the force of weapons.

But this psalm at its root is one of trust, that God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. In each part of the psalm where turmoil or hardship is mentioned, a statement of faith and trust in God comes right next to it.

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter, he utters his voice, the earth melts.

Our nations certainly seem in an uproar right now. From the constant barrage of information, consistently rising numbers of cases of covid-19 coronavirus, emergency bills proposed in our federal government, the first time in over a hundred years the governor of Wisconsin has called off public gatherings, the constant streaming of social and news media, the rapidly changing

rate at which we must change so much of our lives. Our world certainly feels like its in uproar and tottering at this moment.

But just as powerful as this real anxiety and uproar may feel is the power of God. God is more powerful than anything that we could ever encounter, including the power of fear and newness that is so very easy to be consumed by. It's not a fault or a bad thing to be part of this major cultural shift, it's good to be aware of what is going on, to act and plan accordingly. Our actions of social distancing are rooted in love and care for our neighbors. But we cannot let our fear or anxiety consume us. We must take comfort and be empowered by the promises of hope we find in our God and in Jesus Christ.

God is our refuge and our strength, our very present help in trouble. If the powers of fear and anxiety can make you feel the way you do now, then let the power of God can make you feel just as centered and at peace. This doesn't mean we don't have to take action, but it means the action we do take in this unprecedented emergency is rooted in powerful love. How much more powerful is our God who created us, who created the cosmos and this very earth, who has been present long before us and will be with us so long after us too, than this pandemic. Every moment of strife or hardship comes to an end eventually. Kingdoms totter, wars cease, storms blow away, pandemic curves level off. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

We too, in this time of trouble, can lean on God to be our refuge and strength. We don't know exactly when the pandemic will taper off, when we will worship together in person again, when many of us return to work in person. I also think that our world will never quite be the same after this global shift in how we've lived our lives.

But take comfort, dear friends in Christ - there is absolutely nothing that could ever happen, that we could ever do, any situation we could ever face, that will ever separate us from God's holy, healing, and life-giving love. Though we may be anxious or fearful (and I'm convinced any aggression these days comes from this place of fear), there is nothing too big or too great that our God cannot be right there alongside with us. As seminary professor Joy Moore said recently, "These are indeed unprecedented times for us. But not for humanity. Not for the cosmos. And certainly not for our Creator." We will be alright. We will make it through. We will find refuge and strength.

After all the warfare and strife, the Psalm writer notes a key aspect of who God is and how God works - "be still and know that I am God."

In the chaotic beauty of creation, God rested. And so we too can find rest in the midst of chaos, stillness in the midst of struggle, exhalation for de-escalation. So I would encourage you, dear friends, to take some time for stillness. Take time for deep breaths to let the Holy Spirit move through you and thank God for that feeling of being alive. Spend time outdoors among creation to see God's beautiful and life-sustaining work. And know that no matter where you find

stillness, no matter where your feelings or thoughts may go, that God is with you. Be still and know that God is very present with you.

As I mentioned on Sunday, a spiritual practice that is very life-giving, especially to center yourself in the midst of a chaotic time, is *lectio divina*, or dwelling in the Word. This practice is done by reading a passage of scripture a few times over, out loud or in your mind, depending on who you're in company with, and spending time really considering the words and phrases that stick out to you from the passage. It's a great way to share in your life of faith with your partner, your family, or another loved one, especially those in your church family. Feel free to reach out and give someone a call, to have a chat and share in this faith practice together, bringing community about in this time of distancing. If you choose to practice *lectio divina*, or dwelling in the Word, with this Psalm, here are some questions I'd love for you to ponder:

What does stillness feel like for you? Where could you find stillness these days?

How has God been a very present help in trouble for you?

What word or phrase will you take with you from this Psalm? Why?

And now let us end this sermon and scripture portion of tonight's worship with a word of prayer. *Good and gracious God, we come to you tonight with a myriad of feelings, experiences, concerns, and wonderings. But we come to you most of all with faith. We have faith that you are the way, the truth, and the life, and that you are faithful in your promises. You will never abandon or forsake us, even in our greatest times of trial. We thank you Lord, for this steadfastness in your promises. We also lift up in gratitude all the people working steadfastly to keep us going - healthcare workers, mail and delivery folks, grocery store and pharmacy workers, farmers and manufacturers, all the families and parents working to provide school and comfort for their kids, and for all the people stepping up to help one another in loving kindness. We pray that we may continue to be beacons of your hope and agents of your love in our world. Strengthen us for these times ahead, and give us comfort as we rest in your promises of new life. In your Son Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

Thank you for worshipping tonight. May peace be with you all. Amen.