



## From Fear to Faith

Easter Sunday

I love Easter! I love everything about it. I love that it's always on a Sunday. I love that it's in the springtime. I love that it's not as commercialized as Christmas. Most of all, I love what we celebrate on this day—the resurrection of Jesus Christ and all that means for us. Because of the resurrection we have new life and hope that even reaches beyond the grave.

As a pastor, because this is such an important day, you want to be at your best. This is Super Bowl Sunday for a pastor. You need to stick with the subject, but you also want to do something fresh and creative. So I hope you'll forgive me if I take a different approach this morning. Instead of looking at the New Testament where the resurrection story is, I want us to look at the Old Testament. I want us to look at a song. Whoever wrote this song wanted the people of God to sing it well and so he wrote in a way that it would be easily remembered. It has three parts which end with the word "selah." Selah means pause; take a minute and think about what you just sang.

Funny thing about songs, they have a way of getting beneath your skin and into your heart. The strange thing about this song is that while it's very upbeat and hopeful, it also has some dark notes in it. But, when you think about it, that's not unlike the world we live in today. The world the psalmist describes is full of violence. Turn to Psalm 46.

### I. The circumstances of the world are violent.

In vv. 2-3 he describes violence in the world of nature. He speaks of a time when **"the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging."** Several images are used here. The earth opens its jaws in an earthquake. A volcano erupts out of the ocean. Mountains are tossed into the water. Tidal waves slam into a coastline.

The world of nature is beautiful but it's also powerful and violent. It's unpredictable and scary. In 1989 I was sitting at Candlestick Park getting ready to watch the first game of the World Series when the earthquake hit. My friend and I sat in stunned and scared silence as the entire stadium rumbled and rolled like someone was shaking out a dishrag. We felt humbled and helpless.

Sometimes we think all the violence is in the city streets. We say, "If I could just get out of here. If I could just get away and live in the mountains or countryside. My life would be so peaceful." But people who have done that are usually confronted with a different kind of violence. There are insects and animals hungry for blood; flash floods that wash away homes; lightning, thunder and hailstones the size of golf balls. The world of nature is violent.

But that's not all. The psalmist also describes

violence in the world of nations. Look at v. 6, **"The nations are in an uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts."** The image here is of angry nations, stable kingdoms that totter and disintegrate like wax figures under a hot sun. In v. 9 he speaks of a frightening arsenal of weapons used to hurt and kill: wars, bows, spears, shields.

The world is no less violent today than it was then. A few years ago I traveled to Albania. It was during the war in Kosovo and I'll never forget the feeling as we taxied on the tarmac and saw American fighter planes lined up, and then we got off the plane and were greeted by soldiers with attack dogs and machine guns pointed in our direction. We don't experience that much here in America, but when you do you definitely behave yourself!

Violence is constant in our world. We can't help but think of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Think of five police officers shot and killed in Oakland; an innocent little girl murdered in Tracy. Eugene Peterson writes, "Violence without; violence within. Some act out their hostilities on others and we put them in prison. Some act out their hostilities on themselves and we put them in mental hospitals. Some act out their hostilities on nations and we put medals on them."

We've seen this violence in nature as well. Just this week an earthquake devastated Italy. A few years earlier an Indian Ocean earthquake blasted the coastline of several countries with waves 100 feet high, killing more than 225,000 people. Closer to home, Hurricane Katrina killed over 1,800 people and did more than \$100 billion of damage. My son spent the last week in Louisiana with some students from his school cleaning up a mess that's still there.

When Haddon Robinson was out here a few weeks ago he met with our elders. Haddon is not an alarmist; he's not a man given to making extreme statements. But almost in passing he told us he believes America is under the judgment of God. He pointed to 9/11 and Katrina and most recently the near collapse of our economy as evidence. I hope he's wrong.

### II. Despite violent circumstances, we need not live in fear.

When you look at all this violence and all that can happen to any one of us or our children at any time, how do you feel? One word comes to mind: FEAR. We call fear by many names. We call it worry, anxiety, stress. Someone has said anxiety is a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained. One study looked at 500 different people and found 7,000 different fears—an average of 14 different fears per person. Fear limits us; it drains us; paralyzes us. Like an invisible disease, it's

contagious; it spills from the petri dish of our own mind and infects our children, colleagues, friends and churches.

But look what the psalmist sings. In the midst of what seems to be utter chaos and violence, he says in v. 2, **"We will not fear!"** How can he say that? How can WE say that when we consider the kind of world we live in; the kind of uncertainties we live with? Is he telling us to bury our heads in the sand, to deny reality, keep a stiff upper lip and pretend everything is fine? Is he saying, just stay busy, stay preoccupied by other things and you won't worry so much about what might happen? No! The answer is God. This psalmist tells us three things about God; three bedrock convictions that he stands on. And here is the deal—God hasn't changed. Everything around us changes, but he doesn't change. He wants to be for us exactly what he was for the ones who sang this song 3,000 years ago.

### III. We need not fear because of God's protection.

The first conviction is about God's protection. He says in v. 1, **"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."** Later in the psalm he twice says **"the God of Jacob is our fortress."**

When you experience fear, worry or anxiety, where do you run? Do you run to your best friend? Do you run to a bottle? Do run to the mall or to the internet? I grew up in a house with a small creek behind it. Most of the year it was dry. Whenever something happened that made me feel afraid, I could go and hide in the creek. Somehow it brought a sense of safety and security when I felt threatened. For you, that refuge might have been a friend's house, or a grandparent's rocking chair, or a fort high up in a tree.

God is a place for us to run; a place to hide; a safe place to find shelter from the violence around us. He's a fortress where the attacks of the enemy can't break through. We're not strong, but he's strong. As we run to him, we find that he's an **"ever present help in trouble."** His help comes right away. Verse 5 says it comes **"at break of day."** We don't have to muddle through half the day, or half our lives, before God shows up, rubbing his eyes and wondering if there's anything he can do to help.

Sometimes running to God and not elsewhere seems like foolishness to those around us. But it's the safest place to be. In the fall of 1996, wildfires threatened the campus of Pepperdine University. The fires moved quickly and the campus was almost completely surrounded. During the fire, all students were urged to stay on campus. Pepperdine's campus is surprisingly safe in the event of a wildfire and leaving by car posed a greater risk than staying in the safety of the field house. Not only that, the firefighters needed the roads to stay clear of traffic so they could get around quickly as possible.

Having the students stay was a controversial decision. People thought the campus was the most dangerous place to be. The media began broadcasting stories about **"dimwitted administrators holding students hostage."** Parents demanded their children be let go. The drama peaked as a CNN reporter put the Pepperdine's President on live television and asked, **"What would you tell parents whose children are in that field house tonight?"** He pointed out the field house was the safest place on campus. Then he

said something no one expected. He said, **"My own kids are in there, and if it wasn't safe, they wouldn't be there."** The complaints stopped.

Despite appearances, God is the safest place to hide. You might say his own kids are in there. Some people say, **"I ran to him and I cried out to him but he didn't help me. He didn't protect me."** But maybe he did. Maybe the help was right there, but you were looking for something different. We tend to focus on a temporary fix; sometimes God's help doesn't fix the problem, but it fixes us; and we need to see that his help comes in many forms.

### IV. We need not fear because of God's presence.

The second conviction that keeps us from fear has to do with God's presence. He says in vv. 4-7, **"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."**

The psalmist moves from the image of a place of refuge to the image of a river that flows through a city. In the ancient world the most important cities were built on great rivers. Many great cities today like New York and London have rivers flowing through them. In the book of Revelation John describes a vision of the New Jerusalem with **"the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city"** (Rev. 22:1). Here the psalmist is speaking of the city of Jerusalem. But the river is metaphorical; the river is the presence of God. He says **"God is within her."**

Today, that city of God, that holy dwelling of God is us, you and me. When you put your trust in Christ, God's holy presence rushes into your life like a river. Jesus said, **"Whoever believes in me...streams of living water will flow from within him"** (Jn 7:38). And that river of his presence brings several things. It brings gladness. All hell can break loose in the world, but there is a joy and a freedom that flows from within. It also brings security. He says in v. 5, **"she will not fall."** That same word is used earlier in v. 2, **"though the mountains fall into heart of the sea."** It's used again in v.6 when he says, **"kingdoms fall."** In the midst of mountains falling (natural disaster) and kingdoms falling (national disaster), the one who is inhabited by God shall not fall.

The river brings gladness and security. Some of my fondest childhood memories are those by a river. For two weeks a year the Yuba River was our home and our playground. We swam in it. We fished in it. We rode on it. We skipped rocks across it. We slept beside it. We respected the river, but we also trusted it. When I think of that river I think of security; I think of freedom from worry; I think of carefree joy. When this God flows into your life, when he is present, fear is swept away and there is a joy.

### V. We need not fear because of God's power.

We need not fear because of God's protection—he is our refuge. We need not fear because of his presence—he is

our river-like source of joy and security. Here is the third conviction: we need not fear because of God's power. Look at vv. 8-9, **"Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire."**

The psalmist invites us to come and see something. He wants us to see a demonstration of God's power. Once again, God's power is seen over nature when he points to the **"desolations he has wrought on the earth."** But it's also seen over nations when he says, **"He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth."** The image here is of a warrior. God is a powerful warrior and under his hand the world is disarmed. When he walks across the battlefield no one dares lift a hand against him. He is the Lord Almighty, the Lord of hosts; the one who commands armies of angels.

Then he issues a command, **"Be still, and know that I am God."** Another version says, "cease striving." Hebrew scholars tell us it means to "let go" or even to "relax." He may be saying, "Let go of your weapons. There is no need to fight; no need to rush around frantically. You can relax." And this relaxing comes out of knowing he's God. This knowing isn't head knowledge. It's experiential. The word "know" in the Bible often has sexual connotations. Adam knew Eve. Joseph did not know Mary. The best kind of knowing is knowing that's personal and intimate. When you know this God in an intimate and personal way you can relax; you can be still. This is exactly the opposite of what we so often do in the face of danger. When threatened, most of us get busy; we get to work; we pick up our weapons rather than let go of them. But the psalmist says when we really know God, we can relax.

Why? The answer comes in the second part of the verse: **"I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."** There it is again! Are you worried about nations? He says, **"I will be exalted among the nations."** Are you worried about nature? He says, **"I will be exalted in the earth."** The reason we can be still and relax and let go of our fears and our fighting is that victory is guaranteed. God will be exalted.

## VI. Because of God's ultimate victory, we can relax.

And this, my friends, is where the resurrection comes in. It's no mistake that the first words of the angels to the women at the tomb after Jesus rose from the dead were, **"Do not be afraid"** (Mt 28:5). And some of the first words Jesus said after he rose from the dead were, **"Do not be afraid"** (Mt 28:10). The resurrection of Jesus is a statement that reverberates through eternity and says, "I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth. Sin couldn't hold me down. The devil couldn't hold me down. Death couldn't hold me down. Nothing can hold me down. And if I will be exalted in the both nations and nature, what do you have to fear?"

You don't have to fear sin. Sin separates us from God. Sin brings judgment. God is holy and he'll not let sin go unjudged. What kind of God would he be to just let evil run rampant and never bring judgment? But in the resurrection, God the Father said, "The death of my Son paid for it all. The death of my Son was enough. Through him you can be

forgiven. Through him you can be made clean. I raised him from the dead so you would know his death was enough to buy your freedom. You need not fear my judgment for sin because I've already judged it."

You don't have to fear the devil. He's still working. At times it seems like he has the upper hand. But like Paul said to the church at Rome who was in the midst of terrible persecution, **"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet"** (Rom. 16:20). His doom is sure. The resurrection sealed his fate. Martin Luther wrote a famous song based on Ps 46. In the 3rd stanza he sings,

*"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;  
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,  
One little word shall fell him."*

You don't have to fear sin or the devil. Best of all you don't have to fear death. Jesus said, **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies"** (Jn 11:25). That's his promise. In all these things we fear, what's the worst thing that could happen? We could die. Someone we love could die. But Jesus says, "No need to fear that. I took care of that, too."

## CONCLUSION

When I was about 12 years old I got on the wrong side of a boy in my town and he was out to get me. For a period of about a year, I was absolutely petrified of him. We didn't go to the same school, and I didn't know exactly where he lived, but he seemed to always be roaming the streets at the same time I was. He was bigger than me; stronger than me; and tougher than me. I thank God he wasn't faster than me. I was sure if he ever caught me I would be crushed.

Eventually, he disappeared and I haven't seen him or heard of him for about 40 years. But last week I was reading the front page of the *Mercury* and I saw a picture of a local man who had just been indicted for murder. I wouldn't have recognized him until I saw the name. It was him. After I picked my jaw up off the floor, it hit me that I wish I knew then what I know now. In one sense I might have been even more afraid; the guy IS a killer; but it also might have helped to know that at some point in the future he would no longer be a threat.

Someone said when Satan reminds you of your past, you need to remind him of his future! Through the resurrection of Jesus, God proclaims that one day he will be exalted over everyone and everything that can harm us. One day evil will be locked up and put away for good. Despite the violence of nations and nature, his power will disarm the world. Will you be still and know that he is God? What do you need to let go of in order to do that? What are you holding onto that's causing you fear and worry?

Many of you here are believers but you're still living in fear. If you're going to let go of fear, you need to replace it with something. How about replacing it with truth?

Meditate on God's word. Memorize God's word. Fear and worry are things we chew on all day in our minds. But we can chew on the scripture. Start by memorizing Psalm 46. Chew on it daily. You can also replace fear with prayer. Prayer is a powerful weapon to fight fear. Philippians says, **"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."** Whenever you begin down the path of fear and worry, turn it into a prayer.

But if you're here and you don't have a relationship with Jesus you need to first establish that to move from fear to faith. To do that you need to accept God's love for you. 1Jn 4:18 says, **"Where God's love is, there is no fear because God's perfect love drives out fear."** Only God's love can drive out your deepest fears. God loves you so much that he sent his one and only Son to die for your sins. To enter into a relationship with Christ you must confess your sin and believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead. Believing is more than just head knowledge; it's more like trust. Many of you are afraid because you trust in the wrong things—money, possessions, abilities, people. Who are you trusting in? Will you put your trust in Jesus? For some of you this morning, you're ready to move from fear to faith confessing your sin and trusting in Christ as Savior and Lord.

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