

Praying in Times Such as These

Text: Psalm 46

While serving our church in Webster City, I attended a conference sponsored by the United Church of Christ. The keynote speaker was Dr. Peggy Way then a professor of theology at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. The title of her address was, “In Times Such as These.”

I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say we've never seen times such as these. We can look to history and find records of disease, war, famine, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Through our literature and films and in our minds we have imagined a catastrophe that will end the world, but we have never come this close to realizing our worst imaginings as we have with this pandemic that threatens to destroy not just us, but the entire world as we know it.

Once again, our naivete, our vulnerability, has been exposed and attacked. We can no longer live as if we are part of a fantasy world where we believe we are a nation invulnerable to attack where all of our problems are brought to resolution and we live happily ever after. Like our experience of 9/11, we have discovered that we – not just the United States, but the sum total of humanity – has come to realize that we are vulnerable and are not the masters of our lives now or in the days and years to come.

I wrote a sermon about 4.5 months ago that I was going to deliver in your sanctuary on April 19. The sermon had to do with the basic theme of my book – that is, experiencing the sure reign of God as the heart of our prayers and praying. Shortly after I finished that sermon I told my wife that the sermon I had just finished was no longer relevant. The lack of relevance had to do with the fact that the sermon did not take seriously times such as these. The difference between that sermon and this one has to do with the distance I was able to maintain between real lament and merely thinking about it through the use of scripture and actually dealing with our time of lament in the midst of this very real catastrophe. We can no longer face the devastation before us at arm's length. We are looking at devastation that just keeps getting worse by the day – we can't address it in hypotheticals. We are

facing a whole new set of realities that have changed our lives – most likely forever.

Here's the thing. We've always had to deal with adversity – with catastrophe and the ensuing chaos. We know what it's like to be besieged by enemies, the destruction of religious identity, disease, illness – you name it. Psalm 46 is addressing something that seems worse than any of those things. Listen to the psalmist:

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.

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

We're not dealing here with trouble focused on a part of the nation or a piece of the world. We're looking at cosmic trouble. It threatens to attack and undo the world. These verses from the psalm represent the ultimate worst-case scenario for the people. Whatever was confronting the psalmist is confronting the world as he knew it.

According to the ancient Near Eastern view of the universe, the mountains were both the foundations that anchored the dry land in the midst of a watery chaos and the pillars that held up the sky. So, the worst thing that could happen would be for the mountains to shake or tremble, for the earth would be threatened from below by water and from above by the falling sky. In other words, they would be toast! In our day it would be the doomsday scenarios that are more familiar to us – nuclear winter, the depletion of the ozone layer, and the rapid rise of the earth's temperature – or a pandemic that threatens to wipe out the world as we know it coupled with social and economic instability all coming at us at once. In the case of Psalm 46 and in our case today, we face catastrophe.

Certainly, there are similarities between what we see in the psalm and what we're experiencing now. But how are they different? The psalm shows us the difference when it identifies what's central to the song being sung. The difference does not lie in the catastrophe. The difference is where the psalmist begins in his approach to the catastrophe. It begins with trust in

God. It's coming at what's happening knowing that when the world is falling apart – God is still a reliable refuge. God can be trusted. So, the astounding affirmation in the face of the ultimate worst-case scenario is simple, “We will not fear!”

And how do we know this trust is at the center of the psalm? We know because the psalmist affirms that all of this tribulation is held in the hands of God who is our refuge and strength a very present help in trouble. The psalmist begins with an affirmation of trust because the psalmist knows from experience that God is there with them in times of trouble. God was there as they struggled under the Pharaoh in Egypt and God ultimately brought them out a liberated people. God was with them during their wilderness wanderings following the Exodus leading them by a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud. The psalmist lifts up the assurance of God's presence by providing book ends to the psalm with the strong word of assurance that God is with us at the beginning of the song and ends the song with the strong affirmation that the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Now, place that alongside what you see today. Do we begin with trust? Where is the trust? Whom can we trust? Do we trust the scientists who are working like crazy to find a vaccine for this virus? Do we trust what the administration and/or our state leaders are saying about the virus and their plan to deal with it? Do we trust the media – those giving us information as it is made available about the demonstrations in our streets and the unemployment figures? And which brand of media do we trust? Do we trust Fox News, MSNBC, CNN, network television, public television, or newspapers of every stripe? Do we trust any of these? I suppose the answer lies in who we are essentially, how we're wired up, and what life circumstances pretty much define our reality. We've got to trust something, right, or we'll go out of our minds with worry.

Trust. In times such as these we are asked to trust. So often those who call us to trust are those who can afford to trust, who appear to have no worries. In some sense they can hedge their bets on whether or not their lives may be spared the misery of this pandemic because they can afford medical care – the best of medical care. Many look at them – sometimes with great envy – wishing they were in that place. Wishing that the next paycheck to pay for everything would be forthcoming only to know that they won't get it. Those

who call us to trust have the luxury – or at least it would seem so – of trusting themselves. The sage who penned the proverb recorded in chapter 28: 26 has a word for them: “They that trust in themselves or in their own hearts are fools.”

So, for the psalmist, trust began with God whom he called a refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. In times such as these, do we begin with trust in the God of Jacob who is our refuge?

Just the other day I was visiting about this text and this sermon with a good friend and dialogue partner. My friend is in his mid-80s, and speaking for himself as an octogenarian, he wondered how this psalm and the call to trust would play with people in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. Personally, I must confess that I hadn't really thought about that. As you know, I'm in my mid-70s and, while a decade younger, have perhaps a similar take on the things of life and death. So, like the octogenarian, I have lived the lion-sized share of my life and from both a philosophical and theological perspective I can be more open to trusting God affirming that I live with the Lord and I will die with the Lord.

But what about those who have the better parts of their lives ahead of them? How does a 30 or 40 year old, perhaps married with children and working full-time at a job they enjoy and otherwise find meaningful? Whom do they trust? In times such as these, when they are staring catastrophe in the face not knowing if they will live to see their children grow up to adulthood, whom will they trust? Or will they and their spouses be able to support the family into the future when things before them look as bleak as they do now? Whom do they trust?

Let's take it a step further and consider the poor and all those who live at the margins of life – particularly people of color or the immigrant who really has no place - anywhere. Can or do they simply trust that food will continue to appear on their tables or that by some means they will be able to get the medicines they need to address the health concerns of their families? Will they be able to raise their children without having to worry about the color of their skin making them targets for bigots? For many such folks these issues have already been a part of their lives. Now they have something else to add to their worries – a pandemic. In times such as these, whom do they trust?

Many of us can protect ourselves as much as possible. For we who are privileged, moving money into more stable investments seems like a good idea. We stock up on food and cleaning supplies and toilet paper because we can. We get in the car and go for a drive because we have the means to do so and don't have to worry about being stopped by the police because we look suspicious. We circle the wagons as a way of protecting ourselves and what we have. According to the word of wisdom invoked earlier, the one who trusts in himself is a fool.

And those without means. They're in a different place. Whom do they trust, to what do they turn? There is a TV spot that asks the questions faced by many who live in inner city ghettos and in other pockets of poverty in this land. Questions like how can you stay at home when you have no home? How can you sip water every so often to wash away any virus that might be in your mouth when you have no available water? How can you take your temperature without a thermometer?

How do we, how can we respond to this catastrophe? But most of all we wonder who can any of us trust to provide guidance, direction, and a sense of hope in times such as these?

In my book, *The Heart of Prayer: Seeking the Sure Reign of God*, I contend that most everyone yearns to experience God's reign which, according to Mark's gospel, is very near – that is, a world characterized by justice where life's playing field is level and where each one receives daily bread. At the heart of that search is trust, for trust comes at the point of letting go – of giving our lives over to the one we can trust. When I think about that I remember what I wrote as I considered the 7th word of Jesus from the cross. There, on the cross, he says with sure confidence and trust, "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit."

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, paraphrases the 7th word this way, "Father, I place my life in your hands." As I was about to be anesthetized prior to my first brain surgery, the surgeon leaned over me and said, "Don't be afraid, this room is filled with people who care about you." Any fear I brought into that surgical suite left immediately and I remember thinking to myself, "I'm literally giving my life over into the hands of someone I've only known through 3 consultations over 6 weeks – but whom I trust."

In the last chapter of my book I write about various perspectives on prayer that may help us as we struggle with what praying may mean for us. I talk about mindfulness, the practice and discipline of prayer, and the patience required when answers to our prayers just don't come or arrive late. I talk about how the kin-dom of God is central to prayer and that prayer is a journey and not a destination. But all of that being said, if prayer does not begin and end with trust, as does Psalm 46. If prayer doesn't mean placing our lives into the hands of God then everything I've written amounts to nothing more than empty words not worth the paper upon which they're printed.

Yes, we yearn for the kin-dom, the sure reign of God not only for ourselves but for every woman, man, and child on the earth. And our faith calls us to work toward the fulfillment of that deep yearning. So, what does that mean and how do we engage ourselves in ways that will bring this kin-dom to fruition? I am persuaded that our ministry of prayer, when understood as more than mere words, may be our best hope. We have to get over the notion that prayer is abdicating our responsibility as God's people and simply submitting ourselves to whatever direction the wind blows any given day around any circumstance that presents itself.

Because my faith is as it is, I believe the sure reign of God is marked by prayers of justice, mercy, and a walk with an ever faithful God even and especially in times such as these when we face the abject chaos we are experiencing right now – a pandemic, unrest around a social justice system that bends toward those who have, and a health care system that is under attack. Biblically that means everyone, not just those of us who are privileged, but ***everyone*** will live on a level playing field where everyone will receive their daily bread. It means they will know a relationship with God and neighbor characterized by mercy and compassion. And that means all people, not just those who, by accident of birth, have white skin and a silver spoon in their mouths.

So now, what does that look like to trust in the Lord in the face of such chaos? Such trust looks like giving our lives to the God who requires us to ***do*** something shaped by the faith we proclaim. It requires we do justice, love mercy, and walk in prayerful humility with God. That will most likely mean risking ourselves, our reputations, and perhaps our lives as we work

for the advancement and realization of God's kin-dom. It will mean holding those in our political, economic, and social structures accountable by writing sometimes unpopular letters to those who have what they believe is ultimate power over our lives and deaths. It will mean letting our faith shape the way we exercise our right to vote. It will mean speaking the truth of the gospel to those who either do not know it or who think they do and manipulate it to suit themselves.

And so we speak! If someone tells you that universal health care is socialism, you tell them that universal health care isn't socialism, it's Christian compassion, it's feeding the whole world, having compassion for the whole world, recognizing and feeding their humanity. And if someone tells you that black lives matter is a dangerous political movement or group, you tell them that anything that elevates the humanity of those who have suffered discrimination for well over 400 years isn't dangerous, it's a means of being awakened to what Christian compassion looks like right now. And if anyone tells you that unemployment insurance is an expression of a welfare state, you ask them, "What about the needs of the children whose parents don't have enough to feed them dinner tonight?"

Looking out for those who have lost their jobs, who are dealing with COVID19, who are looking over their shoulders hoping they will not be detained and arrested because of the color of their skin or ethnic background, and standing in solidarity with those who have lost their dignity is what Christian compassion looks like. And the ministry of justice, mercy, and the humility of prayerful trust is the very ministry to which we have been called and to which we have committed our lives.

So, friends, in times such as these what do we do? Do we lament? To be sure, we do. And I would say further, we must, for in our lamentations we will begin to know how critical it is to face this chaos without trying to rationalize it away. Lamenting will eventually open our hearts to a new song – a new way of being. Through our lamentations we will begin to see humanity not just as partners in our distress, but as champions for justice, mercy, and compassion that will make the crooked ways straight and the rough places a plain. Lamenting times such as these will bring us not so much to our knees but to an amazing awareness that we are together causing us to trust one another; to be for one another – at first reluctantly, then out

of necessity, and ultimately in joyful companionship with one another. Ah, the miracle of prayerful trust!

So, where does all of this begin and where does it end? I don't think it begins with our reaching out to God when there appears to be no other avenue for rescue. That seems to be our common practice. I believe it begins with trust and the confident affirmation of Psalm 46, that God, not we, is our refuge and strength. It begins when, in our submission to God, we are empowered to face this catastrophe together responding to the call to follow the very one who is exalted among the nations and exalted in the earth; to follow the Lord of hosts who is with us and for us, the God of Jacob who is our refuge, and to do these things in the name of the Good Shepherd who knows our names and holds us gently in the palms of his hands. Then, in times such as these we will be able to declare with trust and confidence, "We will not fear!"

May it be so. Amen.

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Preached at First Congregational Church United Church of Christ

August 16, 2020