

June 1, 2008

Title: Being Calm in Calamity

Text: Psalm 46

The Big Idea: Christians may be calm when the world is in chaos.

Introduction

Project Masada 1

Masada is the name of ancient fortifications in the Southern District of Israel on top of an isolated rock plateau. Masada is on the eastern edge of the Judean Desert and overlooks the Dead Sea.

Project Masada 2

Masada means fortress. It was a place of “many towers, and the fortress included storehouses, barracks, an armory, the palace, cisterns, and fortified gates,” built for Herod the Great as a refuge for himself in the event of a revolt.

Historians say that a group of Jewish zealots who resisted Roman rule took the fortress from Romans soldiers who were guarding the site as an act of rebellion against the Roman Empire. After months of laying siege, which included the building of an elaborate ramp against the western face of the plateau, the Romans were able to breach the wall with a battering ram.

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masada>)

Masada, like any other archeological site, is hardly a shadow of its former glory. The once proud and impenetrable fortress with its palace and roman bath is little more than rubble on a mountain-top. God, on the other hand has not been diminished by the passing of time. God does not change.

1. The one thing in our lives that does not change is God... God remains consistently God.

God speaking through the Prophet Malachi made as definitive statement as can be made when he said, “I am the Lord, and I do not change.” Malachi 3:6

In the Old Testament story of Balaam’s prophecy to King Balak he said, “God is not a man that he should lie. He is not a human, that he should change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through?” Numbers 23:19

James wrote of God and his goodness, “Every good and perfect gift comes to us from God above, in whom there is no variableness or shadow of

change.” One translator puts it, “God never changes or casts shifting shadows.” James 1:17

God remains consistently God despite the shifting of sand and the passing of time... though Masada lies in ruins, but God remains our refuge and strength.

- God is our refuge and strength

“God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.” Psalm 46:1

Our text describes God as our refuge in verse 1, and our fortress in verses 7 and 11. The imagery evoked is that of God as a high, defensible and safe place or sanctuary. A sanctuary is a sacred place of worship but it is also understood to be a place of refuge and protection.

In the Old Testament there were cities of refuge. “There were six cities in the land of Israel where a person could flee for asylum and be safe until trial.” A city of refuge served to break the cycle of violence that goes along with tit for tat / eye for an eye systems of revenge. (Longing for God, Glandion Carney and William Long, IVP, P 133ff)

In recent news here in the Denver Metro area we have been following the story about a rear end accident following a Nuggets game in which a stopped car on I-25 was rear-ended resulting in the deaths of two teenagers riding in the struck car. The details of the accident are only now coming to light and cast a different slant on the circumstances of the accident. But at the time of the accident the driver of the car that was struck, beat the other driver to death at the scene of the accident.

That is the reason cities of refuge existed... not to thwart justice but to give sanctuary to and protect a person until justice could be served.

Our text says that God is our fortress or refuge or sanctuary or city of refuge to whom we flee in times of trouble.

- God is our “on site” help... God is here among us.

“The Lord Almighty is here among us; the God of Israel is our fortress.” 46:7 and 11

We are familiar with a somewhat new industry that caters to a certain niche in society... they are called safe rooms or panic rooms. They are designed by architects and built into the homes of wealthy or high profile people who

want a secure place of refuge in the event of an intrusion, attempted robbery, kidnapping, or terrorist attack.

The most important thing about a safe room is that it readily accessible. The most important thing is that it be there, on site. It is best if you can access the room immediately and without the intruder seeing you.

Though hardly an perfect analogy, God is that kind of on-site safe room. God is here among us. God is on-site and immediately accessible in times of trouble.

Our text also says that the place of God is an indestructible place.

- God rules from an indestructible place.

“A river brings joy to the city of our God, the sacred home of the Most High. God himself is in that city; it cannot be destroyed.”
Psalm 46:4-5

The city of our God is no Masada that can be accessed by a manmade ramp. God’s walls of the city of God cannot be breached by battering rams in times of trouble. Verses 4 and 5 bring to mind the image of the New Jerusalem described in Revelation 22. In our text the Psalmist is looking beyond the present moment to a time when God will gather his own around him in a place of eternal sanctuary and peace – a place that cannot be destroyed.

It is important that we have this image of God, as an ever present and unchanging God who is our safe place in times of trouble, because we live in an ever changing place.

2. Everything else in life is subject to change... even chaotic change.

- The natural world

“...earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea.”
Psalm 46:3

In the natural world earthquakes come and mountains topple...

The images of the Indian Ocean Tsunami on December 26, 2004 are still fresh in our memories. This is one of the first pictures of it coming ashore in Indonesia.

Project Tsunami

Hurricane Katrina has been replaced by Hurricane Nargis in Myanmar. The Balmont, Missouri earthquake has been replaced by the Sichuan China earthquake. The tornado that swept through Windsor is no longer the latest tornado to devastate a community.

If you enjoy watching the Discovery Channel you may be familiar with the Ice Highway. Truckers in the northern territory of Canada drive the ice highway from Yellowknife to remote towns, villages, and mining operations for just two months out of the year. Ideally the ice of the frozen lakes they cross is 60 inches thick, but the drivers know that even winter ice is a fickle friend which constantly shifts, and cracks, and blows out, shatters, and collapses beneath their rigs.

And whenever there is an earthquake or a tsunami or a tornado or a flood or the ice breaks... the world of nature turns from an orderly nature to a chaotic nature and people find themselves in the midst of a natural calamity.

And if the natural world does not throw us enough curves and sinkers... the nations keep us in a constant dither as well.

- **The nations**

“The nations are in an uproar, and kingdoms crumble!” Psalm 46:6

The threat of nuclear war that subsided somewhat after the Cold War has been resurrected as more and more countries in the world actively develop nuclear capabilities.

Project Mohawk (nuclear explosion photo)

If you were to go to YouTube.com and type in Russian Military Parades, two prominent clips would pop up for your viewing:

The first is a Soviet Military Parade in Red Square from November 1, 1984. The second is a display of military power and resolve complete with a display of missiles on May 9, 2008 with President Dmitri Medvedev (pronounced “med –vyed”) over seeing the review.

The nations are in an uproar. The United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea all have nuclear weapons of mass destruction. Syria was recently named along with Iran as another country seeking nuclear capabilities.

When natural disasters occur, people flee to a safe place. When nations are in an uproar, people flee to places of refuge and safety. I suspect that the bomb shelter will be making a comeback someday soon.

It is not that Christians are not concerned for their lives. We are. We know enough to go to the basement when a tornado threatens or to evacuate our homes if a wild fire is sweeping our way. We know enough to stay out of the way of danger in times of conflict.

However, Christians understand that beyond the care of the body is the care of the soul. Jesus said to his followers, “Dear friends, don’t be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill the body; they cannot do any more to you. But I’ll tell you whom to fear. Fear God who has the power to kill people and then throw them into hell.” Luke 12:4-5

Christians can live calmly in times of calamity and chaos because we know that we are more than flesh and blood. We know we are more than bodies... we are also living spirits that are entrusted to the care of a gracious and merciful God who can and will keep us safe for all eternity.

In John 10:28-29, Jesus , speaking of his followers promised, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand, for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else.”

In light of these truths, the Psalmist suggests how we are to respond to calamity and chaos in times of trouble.

3. Our responses to calamity and chaos in times of trouble:

The first thing we do is courageously trust God.

- **Courageous trust in the superior power of God.**

“So we will not fear...” Psalm 46:2

“Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge!” Psalm 46:4

“God thunders and the earth melts!” Psalm 46:6

And this trust is not a misplaced trust. He invites us to take a look around... He said, “Come, see the glorious works of the Lord. See how God brings destruction upon the world and causes wars to end throughout the earth. He breaks the bow and snaps the spear in two; he burns the shields with fire.” Psalm 46:8-9

Take a look... see the creative wonders of an all-powerful and creative God.

See the beauty of a field of meadow of wild flowers.

Project Larmeadow (wild flowers)

See the mighty Mississippi in summertime.

Project Mississippi River See the power!

See the bounty of wheat fields ready for harvest.

Project Wheat Field

See the grandeur of the Grand Canyon.

Project Grand Canyon

And that is just a smattering of God's natural wonders...

See what God has done... a mere remnant of the once impenetrable and inescapable Berlin Wall. It is nothing today but a flat face for graffiti artists.

Project Berlin Wall (a relic today)

We are invited to pause and see the glorious works of the Lord.

Some say the writer of Psalm 46 was referring to a time in Israel's history when the city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the Assyrian army. The story is recorded in II Kings 19. It looked hopeless. The fall and sacking of Jerusalem was imminent. And God said, "The king will not enter this city. For my honor and for the sake of my servant David, I will defend it. That night the angel of the Lord went through the Assyrian camp and killed 185,000 troops... the next morning the Assyrian king broke camp and returned to his own land and stayed there." II Kings 19:34-36

That's why the Psalmist says, before you throw up your arms in despair... look and see what God has done. God is powerful and trustworthy. Neither the power of nature nor the power of nations is greater than that of God who is master of both.

When we have taken a good look around at the wonders of God, the Psalmist suggests we be still.

- **Silence and awe.**

“Be silent (be still) and know that I am God! I will be honored by every nation. I will be honored throughout the world.” Psalm 46:10

Project “The Eye of God”

The NASA Hubble Space Telescope took a photo that was named “The Eye of God” in 2003. The photo is of a Helix Nebula, which is “a trillion-mile-long tunnel of glowing gasses.” (urbanlegends.about.com/library/bl_eye_of_god.htm)

The photo is an uncanny resemblance of a cosmic eye and it inspires cosmic thoughts. Think of it, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.” I Corinthians 2:9

“So be still – be silent and know that I am God...”

Conclusion:

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre writing in Christianity Today, wrote about a little book she read to her children when they were small. It was called A Hole Is to Dig. Each page in the book declares a wonderful purpose of something. A pile of leaves is to jump in. A mud puddle is to slide in. A hole is to dig, and so on.

She points out how different a child’s world is from that of an adult. A child digs a hole, jumps into a pile of leaves, or splashes in a mud puddle. An adult has to fill in the hole before someone trips in it. An adult rakes up the leaves and puts them in big bags. Mud is something an adult scraps off his shoes before he walks on the carpet. (Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, “Silence Is to Dwell IN,” Christianity Today, 8/7/2000, Pp. 62-63)

We are a noisy culture of cell phones and i-Pods and whatever electronic gizmos and attachments we may carry along to make sure we do not find ourselves in an unfamiliar place of stillness and reflection.

Many of us are neither lookers nor reflectors. We are busy, on-the-go people. We live as though we are wired for activity and achievement. And because we are “wired” we are anxious about many things. So it will take some intentionality on our parts to place ourselves in the way of God’s grace where we can see His works and know that he is God.

I urge you to commit your self anew to God and set about to be intentional about your faith and to finding peace in a world of calamity and chaos.

- **Go see the glorious works of a God who invites you to find refuge in him... and may you...**

- **Make time for stillness, for being still and knowing that God is God!**