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Run for Refuge

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TEXT: Psalm 46 (NASB)

God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change
And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea;
Though its waters roar and foam,
Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
The holy dwelling places of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.
The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered;
He raised His voice, the earth melted.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Come, behold the works of the Lord,
Who has wrought desolations in the earth.
He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;
He burns the chariots with fire.
"Cease striving and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."
The Lord of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Dear friends:

May God pour grace and peace into you by the spirit of Jesus, who is risen from the dead.

This is a weird time in our world. One for the history books, as they say, and eventually we will emerge to some form of normalcy. But for now, it's very troubling, isn't it? I remember back to a former worldwide troubling time: 9/11, when airplanes struck the World Trade Center towers and chaos reigned in America. And the local newspaper asked me for a quote before I even had heard the news. And the first thing that popped into my consciousness was Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength. A very present help in trouble." Do you have trouble? A better question is: what is your trouble? As we consider the truths of Psalm 46, I'd like kind of weave it together with the beautiful story of Jesus and His disciples in a storm in the sea of Galilee, where the disciples are struggling with the storm by themselves in the boat and Jesus comes to them, walking on water, according to Matthew 14.

How does trouble come to you? Have you lost a child to death? Maybe there's chaos in your marriage struggle. Or maybe your interpersonal relationships are always estranged. Maybe you're dealing with divorce and the pain that lingers or drowned in bills and finances are a struggle. Did you lose your job? Is your son or daughter struggling with addiction? Have you ever had a doctor come into the waiting room where you're sitting and say "Sir, I'm sorry to tell you, but the truth is..." and then he finishes the chaos? Trouble sometimes comes like an invisible opponent: it can come in moments, it can last for periods of months of time, or years, or maybe even feel like trouble is a constant in your life. Some trouble is our own doing, but sometimes trouble just rolls over us, like this worldwide pandemic we call the coronavirus. I remind you of what Jesus said in John 16:33: "In this world you will have trouble, but take courage, for I have overcome this world."

So in this moment where the world has been forced to retreat and isolation, where we're sequestered away, I want you to hear this powerful truth, Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength. A very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear." Maybe this is a time for us to grow closer to God than ever before. Maybe we have fresh revelations of the priorities of God and the kingdom of God and what God is up to in

the world. In devotions this week, I heard that the antidote for our fear is faith in God. So in the stormy and dark times we might be prone to ask, “God, where are you?” The disciples were in a boat, tossed like a beach ball on the waves of the Sea of Galilee, and I’m sure that they were wondering, “Jesus, why would you desert us now? Where are you?”

But it's important to remember that Jesus was not surprised by the storm. It's important for us to remember God has not been taken off guard by this worldwide illness we called coronavirus. God is a very present help in our time of trouble. That's counterintuitive isn't it? Because when we experience adversity or difficulty, when trouble envelops us and suffocates us, we assume that God has abandoned us, or that God doesn't care, or that God has no power to help us. That God has left us to flounder for ourselves. God, it says, is in the midst of His people. What a beautiful name for Jesus when he was born that they called Him “Emmanuel”: God is with us. God does not promise to spare us trouble or to remove from our lives the difficult elements. But God, as in Jesus, said “I'll never leave you or forsake you.” His presence is a precious gift. So Psalm 46 says we're not going to be afraid; we will not fear even if the earth changes, even if mountains slide into the sea, because the Lord is with us.

Isn't it true that the longer a storm continues the more our fear intensifies? Our fear in the darkness distorts our perceptions of reality. In the middle of the night, the disciples are pulling with all their strength, straining at the oars against the waves, and the waves are pounding, lapping over the sides of the boat. Water is filling the bottom of the boat. And they panic – they're terrified. They must have wondered “what's to become of us?” But Jesus, in that moment, is actually walking toward them on the top of the wind and the waves and the water. And when He's close to them, they see Him and call out “it is a ghost!” Their perceptions were distorted by their fear. The magnification of their fear made them assume the worst. Our imaginations run to the negative, we run to the worst possible scenario.

Here's the truth, people of God: Jesus walks on top of the water. Jesus is greater than all our limits. Jesus is greater than our trouble, He's greater than whatever is the source of our fears. He walks through the dark. In Psalm 139 it says, “Even the darkness is not dark to you, O Lord.” Jesus walks through the howling storm on top of the waves; Jesus is above our circumstances. Jesus is above that which threatens our existence. Christ's power and authority commands the wind and waves. Here's what I want you to realize:

nothing can prevent or block Jesus coming to where you are to be with you in your trouble or to change your circumstances. What did Jesus say to the disciples as He came close to them, walking on the wind and waves? He said "Take courage, it is I. Don't be afraid." The Greek words literally say "Take courage, I Am. Be not afraid." Jesus actually claims to Himself the same name for God which God revealed to Moses at the burning bush, when He called him [Moses] to go back to Egypt to deliver His people from slavery. "I Am who I Am: Yahweh." Jesus says "I Am." I am the living God, who has revealed Himself through history. I Am who I Am. I will be what you need me to be."

So where are we going to turn in trouble? I encourage you, in faith, to run for refuge. "Refuge" is not a place. "Refuge" is not a set of circumstances that you desire. Rather, "refuge" is found in a person, in the living God. Jesus is the great I Am who broke the bondage of God's people in Egypt to end their suffering and oppression. He is the great I Am who parted the Red Sea so that Pharaoh and his army were defeated. He is the great I Am who provided mana in the wilderness, who delivered them from the deadly pestilence of snakes, who made water flow from a rock. Like the verse of an old hymn: "There is life for a look at the Savior." Jesus, through history, is the great I Am, and the great I Am gives miracle after miracle to His people, victory after victory, and Jesus would say to you again today, "Believe that I Am. You don't need to be afraid."

So we need, like Psalm 46 says, to "Cease striving." To be still and know that God is God. We need to listen for the Master's voice, as Jesus would say to us "I Am. I am with you. Don't be afraid." So where we can look at our trouble? Faith looks to Jesus Christ. Faith does not look at the trouble, faith will not look at the source of the fear. Like it says in 1 John 4:4, "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world."

So faith yokes us to the supernatural power of Jesus' spirit. Don't you love the character of Peter? Even in the midst of the storm, Peter says "Let me walk on the water to you, Lord." Is our faith more like Peter's, that wants to climb over the side of the boat and experience the unbelievable, supernatural infusion of power to rise above the elements, with eyes locked on Jesus Christ, and experience the victory? Or do we, like the disciples, sit in the boat and cower in our fears in the midst of the storm? But we also know that Peter, in the middle of experiencing that great miracle of walking above the elements with his eyes on Jesus, eventually did look to the source of his fear, and as soon as he did his fears caused him to sink like a rock. But know this: Jesus' arm is

never too short to reach His sinking child. And in the midst of the storm, Psalm 46 says “There's a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” So wherever you are, the current and flow of God's spirit flows to you and in you and through you, and faith gladly receives the flow of the power and love and blessings that God alone can give.

So God is our refuge and God is our strength. God is our safe place, our hiding place. More than that, in God's presence as our refuge, we can rest. Our spirits, our bodies, our souls can heal. We are restored in His love. So I say to you, like the captain of the army in an old Western, “Run for cover!” Run for refuge to Jesus Christ. I love the line of an old liturgy from the Concordia Lutheran hymnal: “Wherefore we flee for refuge to Your infinite mercy, seeking and imploring your grace.” Why would we run to Jesus to be our refuge? Because He can be our powerful protector. We receive from Jesus the courage to endure and to persevere. We receive from Jesus the mercy and grace we need in the moment. And Jesus the Spirit fills us with peace, a peace that passes understanding. So I encourage you to seek the Lord as you refuge. Say it out loud, say it in a prayer: “Lord, you are my refuge.” Faith believes that the Lord is with us. Faith believes that the Lord is greater than all our trouble. Faith believes that He loves us and hears us.

There's another thing I want to share with you today: there's a quote by a wonderful Christian author named A. W. Tozer, who wrote “A scared world needs a fearless church.” We are called to be salt and light to the culture in which we live. Salt is a preservative but also salt gives the “flavor” of hope. We're to be a light in the darkness. You are not the powerless victim of the circumstances of the world's oppression, or even the coronavirus. We are not passive in response to what happens. We are to actively run for refuge! We are to, in faith, actively seek the Lord. Faith receives the Spirit's strength as it flows to us. And the Spirit renews us daily in His love. Say it with me: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore I will not fear, the earth should change. The Lord of hosts is with us. Cease striving and know that God is God.”

Amen.