

I

When I first discerned God's call to ministry years ago, I knew that this calling would lead me to some strange places and odd situations, and it has. But never did I dream that there might come a day like this one. Never did I dream there might come a day when I would find it necessary to meet colleagues to discuss how we might *discourage* the people of God for gathering in the house of the Lord on the Lord's day.

And yet here we are.

To be honest with you, I haven't felt this anxious in a long time. In fact, the last time I can recall feeling this way was on the evening of September 11, 2001. I remember standing with my father in the front yard of his home just north of Dallas, and both of us remarking on the absence of the sound of aircraft engines, which was a part of ordinarily life just a few miles from both Love Field and DFW International Airports.

And then Dad said something that sent chills up my spine. He said, "If they really want to frighten us, they'll hit us again tomorrow from somewhere else."

But even this feels different. Ministry is a people business, but right now, every hand that I might have once shaken after worship or held at a bedside in prayer or high-fived in the Children's Ministry Suite may be a potential threat, not just to myself, but

to my wife, to my children, to my parents, and to you, the people whom we pastors and elders have sworn a solemn vow to love and serve with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. This is just a surreal day.

And yet here we are.

II

And yet, here *we* are. A few of us are here present in the sanctuary. Many of us are tuning in from somewhere else thanks to the gift of technology. And still others of us are present in spirit, if not in body or in cyberspace.

Even on this most surreal of days, the church still gathers around the Word and the Sacraments. I'm so grateful that you're here.

And that you're here.

And that you're here.

Here *we* are.

Here we are, frightened and anxious as we may be. No one can predict with any certainty about what life will be like in this world tomorrow, much less next week or next month.

And yet here we are.

III

As early as this past Wednesday, I was planning to continue our walk through the Gospel of Mark today with a reading from chapter 12, but the Spirit had other plans for us today, so instead we'll be hearing from Psalm 46.

The psalms are a unique kind of biblical literature. They weren't composed by one author at one point in time to commemorate one particular occasion or event.

The psalms are more like the hymnal of our ancient ancestors. And just like a hymnal, the psalms are a collection of songs and prayers that were collected over time from many different composers, and later editors gathered and arranged the 150 psalms that we have in our bibles today.

We don't know the name or circumstances of the author of Psalm 46, nor can we pinpoint a specific historical event that inspired its composition of Psalm 46. But you and I are keenly aware this morning of a truth that our ancient ancestors also knew - life is uncertain and can turn on a dime, and threats and calamities can come from out of nowhere.

So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from 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.

IV

My friend, I hope you heard a word of comfort from Psalm 46 this

morning. You are not the first child of God to go through something like this.

As I stand in this room, I think about the women and men who've come before us in this place. I think about pastors who have stood in this pulpit and faced anxious people in times of great peril. And I can hear them whispering the opening lines of Psalm 46 to you and to me this morning:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth and daily life should change.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the mountains and the markets should fall.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the seas and the leaders should roar, though the nations of the earth be in an uproar.

My friend, it is perfectly OK to be anxious and afraid. Being anxious and afraid is *not* an act of hypocrisy or heresy or apostasy. In fact, it's a tremendous act of biblical faith to trust in the goodness and mercy of God in spite of your fear.

Jesus invites you to overcome your fear by reaching out instead of shrinking in. You may not be to reach out and take a hand, but you can pick up a phone and, as the old phone company slogan used to say, reach out and touch someone.

You can drop a note of encouragement to those who are feeling especially isolated and alone in these uncertain days, especially those who live in nursing homes and senior care centers.

You can pray hard for those who stand on the front lines of the fight with this disease – for the doctors and the nurses and the first responders and those who provide our vital public infrastructure – those who suit up, rain or shine, pandemic or not, on behalf of us all. You can send a gift card for groceries or take out to their families.

You can make a generous contribution to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, which continues to be the hands and feet of Christ in the places that have been hardest hit. There are so many ways that you can turn your anxiety into action, to turn your fear into an act of faith.

V

Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think there'd be a Sunday like this. But here we are.

But here *we* are.

The congregation I served in Texas before answering God's call to Georgia went through a process wherein we sold our building and land. We discerned that after 75 years, God was calling us to move to a new home, much like God called Abraham and Sarah to pick up stakes and leave their hometown at the age of 75. And just like Abraham and Sarah, our congregation had heard

the call of God to go, but God was a little fuzzy on the details about where. All we knew at that point was that the call was to land that I will show you.”

It was not easy move away from a church building that we had come to know and love – a building in which for generations people had worshiped, had pledged themselves to one another in Christian matrimony, a building in which we had gathered for services of witness to the resurrection, the building in which I baptized one of my own children.

But through that long and painful process, we were reminded of an old camp song:

The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people. I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together. All who follow Jesus all around the world, yes, we're the church together.

So whether we're all back together in this building next month or next summer, let us remember that wherever we are, we are the church. The church is not a building. The church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place. The church is a *people*.

So let us *be* the church in this season of uncertainty. Let us *be* the church to one another. Let us *be* the church to our neighbors.

I am the church.

You are the church.

We are the church together.

None of us can say what tomorrow holds. But we who follow Jesus know the One who holds tomorrow.

The Lord is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, *we* will not fear.

Thanks be to God. Amen.