



Date: November 22, 2015

Title: "After the Violence"

Scripture: Psalm 46

Description: Psalm 46 describes violence but centers on God. The psalm offers two responses of faith when violence is experienced.

The world is a violent place. The French police have eliminated the person who planned the bombing. Many nations have joined with the U.S. seeking to eliminate the threat of ISIS. The news reports this past week have been dominated by progress reports as well as viewpoints concerning strategy. Yet the world remains a violent place.

Life is risky business. All the drones, all the boots on the ground, all the CIA intelligence is not going to make the violence in the world disappear. What should we do? Nothing?

We stood semi-naked in the locker room of our fitness center, towels wrapped around our waists, going toe-to-toe in heated debate. "We should bomb the f-word out of them all," he raged. "That's what our nuclear capability is for!" "But that would kill so many innocent civilians," I protested. "We would be like the terrorists we despise." His next response hinted that he was doing something I had not even considered: he was listening! "Then what do you suggest we do? How should we respond?"

It was Sunday afternoon. I had already preached my quota for the day. I was tired and at the gym to relax, not grapple with heavy questions. "What do you suggest we do? How should we respond?" So I whispered, "I really don't know," and headed for the shower.

I've had a week to ponder, a week to wrestle, but I still can't say, "Well, come to church next Sunday and I'll tell you!" I can say, "Come worship and pray with us. It helps." Does doing what we do here help? You tell me; you're here. Worship, church, and prayer are more than escape mechanisms, aren't they? Healthy worship, solid church, and realistic praying are more than things we do to hide from reality. Healthy faith deals with life.

Psalm 46, the words we just read, deals with life. Violence is taken seriously. It is real. But in Psalm 46, the violence is kept in perspective. The psalm pays attention to violence, but it pays attention to God even more.

The psalm is filled with violent images. It begins with the violence in nature, with a description of either an earthquake or an erupting volcano. "...though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult." This writer has witnessed tsunamis, watched the devastation wrought by hurricanes, seen the destruction of floods.

Then it describes political violence: “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter, he utters his voice, the earth melts.” Military violence is also addressed: “...he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.”

If we think that looking to God fills us with undisturbed peace and joyful serenity, so that we don't have to take barbarity seriously, we are terribly naïve. Real faith lives in the real world.

But the Psalm isn't about violence. Filled with descriptions of violence, the Psalm isn't about violence. It's about God. God is the subject of the key sentences: “*God* is our refuge and strength.” “*God* is in the midst of the city...” “*The Lord of Hosts* is with us; the *God of Jacob* is our refuge.” Say that line with me. (It's the last line in the Psalm, the last one you read in the bulletin.)

“THE LORD OF HOSTS IS WITH US; THE GOD OF JACOB IS OUR REFUGE.”

The violence and danger are real, but God is more real. Nothing can out-reality” god, and the heartbeat of the Psalm is repeated, once in the middle, once at the end. Say it with me: (It's your last line in the bulletin.) “THE LORD OF HOSTS IS WITH US; THE GOD OF JACOB IS OUR REFUGE.”

The middle part of the Psalm is the best part, and the hardest part. “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.” (v. 4)

Where is God? In the middle of the city. The city is the holy habitation of the Most High, not in the pristine beauty of nature, at least not just in nature. God is in the city, where the action is. We don't have to go to a mountain retreat to find God (though we do encounter God there). We don't have to go to a church sanctuary to find God (though you and I have often found God here in this place.) God is with us as we live and work and commute in our lives.

The old fashioned King James Version said it like it came straight out of the Appalachian Mountains: “God will help her right early.” Our translation is easier to understand: “God will help it when the morning dawns.” We don't muddle through half our day or half our lives before God shows up, rubbing his eyes as though waking up from a nap. God is a very present help in time of trouble.

And that's the hard part. “God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved.” But we saw with our eyes people running in fear, responders holding the limp bodies of children, smoke and rubble scattered. The words that *follow* are the ones that seem true: “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.” (I always thought the “he” who utters his voice was God, but not necessarily. “He” could be anyone whose finger is on the detonator of an IED, anyone who pulls the trigger of a semi-automatic in a school building, anyone who takes control in the name of destruction.)

Clearly, God does not cause the planted bombs to misfire. God does not cause the stone and shrapnel to miraculously fall around the occupants so that all escape harm. What does God do? How does God help?

Here. This is what God does: “The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” Say it with me: “THE LORD OF HOSTS IS WITH US; THE GOD OF JACOB IS OUR REFUGE.”

I wish that I could tell you that God on our side means God prevents harm to all who have faith. Or that the preacher can provide explanations that make it all make sense. But God is neither All-State or a Google search engine, offering 100% protection or air-tight answers.

What God does offer is God. The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. God offers presence, a loving presence who suffers with us, who has compassion for us, and who is on our side.

That does not mean a helpless, impotent presence. “The Lord of *hosts* is with us...” “Hosts” is the biblical word for “armies”—vast, angelic troops, swift and stalwart, carrying out the will of God. Always invisible, always effect in ways that can go unnoticed, always in a manner that can be overlooked if we don’t pay attention. “The Lord of hosts is with us.”

That’s how God responds to the violence and dangers in our world. With a caring presence and with invisible armies - in ways that are enormously effective yet often unnoticed.

How shall we respond? That’s the crucial question: not how shall our government respond or God respond, but how shall we respond. Psalm 46 offers two actions we need to take.

The first is “Come, behold the works of the Lord.” The violence is in bold Technicolor; the video footage shown on 24-hour news; the actions of God are quiet, often a footnote at the bottom of the news program. Taxi drivers in Paris drove people home for free after bus and metro lines closed. As soon as news of the attacks spread Friday, Parisians began tweeting their addresses to welcome stranded strangers into their homes. German-Italian pianist David Martello wheeled a piano to Bataclan site and played “Imagine” for gathered mourners

Listen to the news; watch the video clips of acts of destruction of terrorists, then look around you to “see what ‘desolations’ God has wrought on the earth.” In this sentence, the poet resorts to irony, using the word “desolations” to describe these things that come from God—desolations of beauty, of compassion, of hope. Desolations that take your breath with beauty, fill your eyes with tears. In fiery explosions, the desolations of terrorists bring chaos and death; but in quiet acts of courage across the world, the “desolations” of God bring life.

“Come, behold...” Playing tennis, the opponent hits the ball and charges the net. At least you hope the net is going to stop his charge, as he menacingly seems ready to smash anything that comes near. “Watch the ball,” instructs your coach. “Look at the ball, not your opponent. Keep your eye on the ball.” That’s what the Psalm is reminding us.

The violence is real and we cannot escape being aware of it and affected by it. But God is more real than the violence. “Come, behold...” Keep your eye on the ball. Keep your eye on this truth: (say it with me, that last line of the Psalm.) “THE LORD OF HOSTS IS WITH US; THE GOD OF JACOB IS OUR REFUGE.”

The second instruction the Psalm gives us is this: “Be still and know that I am God.” When we are afraid, when we are hurried, frantic, noisy, we are incapable of intimate knowing. Nothing good was ever accomplished in a stampede.

The word “know” in the Bible has sexual connotations. “Adam knew Eve and she bore a son...” “Joseph did not know Mary...” Knowing isn’t intellectual, it is intimate. Knowledge that is personal and life-giving is not information, it is shared intimacy. One of the things we Christian citizens can do is take

time to slow down, to withdraw from the commotion, and establish time for leisurely privacy. Be still and know.

You cannot make love while driving in a NASCAR race. You cannot be peaceful in a hurry. There are things you cannot know in a rush. The best minds of the world are stretched to their limits about how to respond to terrorism. The most relevant contribution that Christians can make at this point is the focused, disciplined exercise of two acts: being still—determined, repeated, unhurried, disciplined, quiet meeting with God, and keeping our eyes on the acts of God. As we do that, with greater and greater assurance, we will say with confidence, (say it with me): “THE LORD OF HOSTS IS WITH US; THE GOD OF JACOB IS OUR REFUGE.”

Beginning Announcement.

Psalm 31:17. "Embarrass the wicked, stand them up,  
leave them stupidly shaking their heads  
as they drift down to hell." --The Message

Our anger can get intense. Sometimes its intensity is justified. There are people among us who deserve the fires of hell. Christians are allowed to have intense feelings of anger and strong desires for judgment to those who commit acts of terror, slaying innocent people.

The purpose of church this morning is not to "pretty up" these feelings with a call to sweetness. Nor are we gathered to come to an agreement on a strategy for retaliating. The purpose is, however, to affirm that God is a God of justice, to ask God to do swiftly that which God is already determined to do. And to affirm that our safety, our peace, rest in God.

For the Introit, we chose a hymn from Taize, a village in France that has become a spiritual center for people from all over the globe. The words express an affirmation of our faith and a theme of our worship this morning. In the aftermath of the bombings in Paris ten days ago, we wanted to make this small gesture of solidarity with our French sisters and brothers, especially the French family who have become part of our church since moving here. (If our hymnal contained a hymn in Lebanese, we would have sung that as well, to include the people of Beirut in this gesture.)

Our nation's leaders, and the leaders of other nations, formulate a response to the acts of terrorism and how to make our world safe from the evil violence of ISIS. Without expecting that everyone in this church should agree politically, in faith we want to affirm something we can all agree on. These words will do: "In God alone my soul can find rest and peace; in God, my peace and joy."

The choir will sing in both English and French, and repeat the tune several times. You are welcome to join in singing when you feel comfortable doing so.