

**“A Very Present Help”
Psalm 46**

**September 16, 2001
Dr. J. Howard Olds**

Sometimes in our lives we have great pain and deep sorrow. But if we are wise, we'll know that there is always a tomorrow.

To think that in one short week, we have witnessed persons leaping from burning buildings, spouses calling to loved ones from hijacked airplanes, thousands of Americans entombed in an inferno, and the United States of America attacked in the first war of the 21st century--well it is more than our civilized souls can bear. We will not soon forget nor can we fully comprehend all that is happening to us now. The horrors that are making history before our very eyes will haunt us for a lifetime.

In moments like this, we rightly seek comfort and counsel from our faith. It is good and right that in great numbers you have come to church today. Our president has called us to prayer, and millions have heeded his call. I have found myself personally pondering the Psalms again this week as we have spontaneously gathered and sometimes filled this sanctuary for prayer services. We have read a Psalm almost every time. Today I want to turn to yet another one. It is Psalm 46. This ancient hymn of the Hebrews celebrates Judah's triumph over tragedy. They too were under siege. It addresses the two questions that seem to be on every body's mind today. Where is God? How can I help?

Where is God? **God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. God is a very present help.** While God does not isolate us from trouble, neither does God desert us in the midst of our pain. As the Creed says, “We are not alone, we live in God's world.” Though the mountains shake, the waters roar, the jets crash, and buildings crumble, the

Lord of Hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

It was while wading through some personal moments of trouble that I made a spiritual discovery some years ago. I discovered that a single movement of one space on the word processor changed an anguished cry of, "God is nowhere" into a great affirmation of faith, "God is now here!" I suspect that down in the souls of every American today we are trying to make that judgment call. Is God nowhere, or is God now here? O soul near despair in the lowlands of strife, is one space too much of a leap of faith for a time such as this? Let it resound out of the depths of our souls and hearts: **God is now here!** Let us never forget. God did not will this terrorist attack. God is not trying to teach America a lesson. We are not being judged by the Almighty. As the Psalmist says in verse 5, "God is in the midst of the city. It shall not be moved. God will help it when the morning dawns."

So if you want to find God today, look not in the explosions that shake the sky, look at firemen, and rescue workers, medics, police officers, and countless others who are still digging through the debris with their bare hands in hope of finding one human being alive. God is that kind of searching God. God is a very present help in time of trouble.

God is our refuge. A refuge is a sanctuary, a shelter. A refuge is a haven, a home. A refuge is a port of protection, a place of peace. 'Refuge' is one of the favorite words of the Psalms. Psalm 57:1 says, "Be merciful to me, O God, in the shadow of your wings, I will take refuge." Psalm 59:16 says, "You have been a fortress for me and a refuge in my day of trouble." Psalm 62:7 says, "On God rests my deliverance and my honor. My strength and my refuge is God."

Once upon a time, families were safe places, but abuse and abandonment are now leaving many hurt and deserted.

There was a time when schools were safe havens, but guns have found their way to our schools and students are now targets. Until this week, America was our sure defense. With guns and missiles and military might, we could conquer the world. Now terrorists have slipped through our security systems and used our own airplanes as bombs. Here we gather in the hands of God. Can we trust God and not be afraid? Was Isaac Watts right when he wrote?

*Under the shadow of thy throne, still may we dwell secure
Sufficient is thine arm alone, and our defense is sure!*

Let it resound in the depths of our very beings today that even in these shaky times, we rest on the certain and sure foundation of our faith. We lean on the everlasting and ever-loving arms of Almighty God. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

God is our powerful strength. A little girl, running ahead of her mother, was pushing hard against the heavy door of the local bank. Her weak little arms could not push the strong door open. As her mother came close she invited the little girl to try again. This time when the child pushed with all her might the door opened. What the girl failed to see was her mother's arm far above hers pushing the door open.

P.T. Forsyth once said, "If within us we find nothing over us, we succumb to what is around us." There is a Hand that is above us. It is a loving Hand. It is pushing open the doors of possibilities that yet remain among us. He is our strength.

Dave Dravecky once wrote: "In America, Christians pray for the burden of suffering to be lifted from their backs. In the rest of the world, Christians pray for stronger backs so they can bear the suffering." It is going to take the strength of every American to overcome these days. Let us not be frozen in fear. Let us not be tempted by greed. Let the spirit of unity prevail. Let us work for the common good. Ask not

what your country can do for you today. Ask what you can do for your country!

Moses, with a speech impediment, was called to articulate the terms of freedom to Pharaoh. With God's help, he did it. Gideon was asked to fight a multitude with a tiny army. With God's help, he did it. Esther was asked to risk her life to save the Jews. With God's help, she did it. Mary was asked to birth a King without a history of royalty. With God's help, she did it. If we in our own strength rely, our striving will be losing. But let there be no doubt about it today, with God's help we will do it. Indeed we will. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

There is another phrase in Psalm 46 that I want to bring to our attention this morning. It's the tenth verse. It attempts to answer the question, ***what can we do?*** All of us want to do something. We can give a little blood and send a little money. But something greater than that cries out from the depths of us. Perhaps the answer is in verse 10. The Lord says to besieged Jerusalem, "Be still and know that I am God." Be still and know that I am God. **Be still.**

Emerson once said, "Let the hours be silent so the centuries can speak." Today is the closest thing to a Sabbath that America has experienced in a very long time. There are no golf tournaments today. There are no NASCAR races today. The football games have been canceled. While there are elements of silence that frighten us all, I urge you to cherish this moment. Lean into it fully. Hug your family today. Talk with some friends today. Take time to pray today. Ponder in the privacy of your own soul the really important things of life today.

Morton Kelsey says, "Most of our lives are like jewelry stores where some trickster has mixed up the price tags. Diamonds are priced next to nothing while worthless pins are priced in

the millions. As long as the store is crowded with people there is no chance of putting things right. So, we must stop business as usual, close the doors, step back, take time alone, and restore our true values.”

Whenever I am troubled
and lost in deep despair,
I bundle all my troubles up,
and go to God in prayer.
I tell him I am heartsick,
and lost and lonely too.
That I am deeply burdened,
and I don't know what to do.
But I know he stilled the tempest,
and calmed the angry sea.
And I humbly ask if in his love,
he'll do the same for me.
Then I just get quiet,
and think on thoughts of peace.
And as I abide in stillness,
my restless murmurings cease. (Helen Steiner Rice)

Be still. Be very still and **know God**. Know the ways of God today. Learn the difference between justice and revenge today.

We received a call Friday from a friend of ours. Asad came to this country twenty-three years ago as a refugee from Afghanistan. He was a student in Sandy's elementary classes. We have stayed in touch through the years. When we threw a party a few months ago for Sandy's retirement, Asad came to say a few words. Today he is a productive, patriotic, wage-earning American citizen. But, Friday he was full of fear. "Dr. Olds," he said, "Would you tell your people not to hate my people? Someone pulled a knife on my brother at school today." When we give in to hate we do exactly what the terrorist want us to do. Asad said, "I love this

country. This is my land; I'm a part of all that is happening here. Don't let the enemy win by separating us one from another." For Asad I say to you today, my friends, whatever your anger, whatever your rage, let us not stoop to the ethics of our enemies, not in God's name. Be still. Be still and know the ways of God.

Be still and **know the will of God**. It is the will of God for Americans to unite. It is the will of God for Americans to help. It is the will of God for Americans to pray. It is the will of God for Americans to surrender selfish gain for the common good. It is the will of God that we become a community of liberty and justice for all. Following the advice of the prophet, Micah long ago, we will be wise to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Be still and know God. Let us pray to the Lord.