

**Sermon**

**“Hope and A Promise”**

November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday

Based on Psalm 46 and Luke 23:33-43

**SCRIPTURES:**

**Psalm 46**

<sup>1</sup> God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. <sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; <sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. <sup>4</sup> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. <sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. <sup>6</sup> The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. <sup>7</sup> The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. <sup>8</sup> Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. <sup>9</sup> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. <sup>10</sup> “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.” <sup>11</sup> The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. [NRSV]

**Luke 23:33-43**

<sup>33</sup> When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[<sup>34</sup> Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. <sup>35</sup> And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” <sup>36</sup> The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, <sup>37</sup> and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” <sup>38</sup> There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” <sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” <sup>40</sup> But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? <sup>41</sup> And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” <sup>42</sup> Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” <sup>43</sup> He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” [NRSV]

**OPENING PRAYER:** Holy God, through the generations you have spoken to us. You have sent voices crying out in the wilderness. You have sent the words of an overjoyed new father and an expectant mother. You have even sent the assurance of a condemned man on a cross. Now, quiet in us any voice but your own that, by the power of your Spirit, we might hear the words you speak to us today; and let all God's people say ... Amen.

### **Wilderness Periods**

You know that old saying, "Time flies when you're having fun?" Well, that old saying certainly sums up this past year and slightly more for me. My time with this family of faith here at First Presbyterian Church has been busy and wonderful and blessed, but it has flown by so quickly. And, yes, it has indeed fun!

And, my hope and prayer is that everyone here today has experienced a time, or times, in your own lives when this sentiment has applied to you—when time has seemingly flown by (or even seemingly vanished); when you are having so much fun that you hardly notice how the time has gone by. But, I'm also realistic enough to know that even if you have experienced times like that, it's equally likely that you've experienced a time, or times, in your lives when it felt more like wandering in the wilderness than anything else—times when it hasn't always seemed like time was going by quickly, and times when it hasn't always seemed like fun either. Instead, you may have felt frustrated, confused, fatigued, maybe even abandoned. In such times it's tough to trust ... and it's tough to hope.

As individuals, we are prone to such wilderness periods throughout our lives. They may be associated with a variety of circumstances, from struggles with family members or other loved ones, to feeling stuck in a job you just can't figure a way out of, to times of recovering from a broken bone, a broken heart, a broken soul, and more. Similar can be said for us collectively as a congregation, acknowledging that wilderness periods can certainly come and go when the life of any community of faith includes its fair share of ups and downs and ebbs and flows over the years. I'm aware that many congregations consider a season of interim transition to be akin to a wilderness period. Of course, that type of wilderness facing a congregation isn't so much physical or geographical in nature,

but it certainly would be an emotional and spiritual wilderness, just like any one of us as individuals may experience.

And, while I sincerely hope and pray that during our season of transition together we have avoided the feeling that we have been wandering in the wilderness, I grant anyone the possibility that the change going on here at First Presbyterian Church has left you feeling frustrated, confused, fatigued, maybe even abandoned. Maybe it has been tough to trust ... maybe, it has been tough to hope.

### **We Are Not Alone**

But, dear friends, we have never been abandoned—not in your journey nor in mine. God has never left us alone. God has been here all along. God is with us now, and God always will be.

This is the essence of today's Psalm reading. In only eleven short, beautiful verses, Psalm 46 is an affirmation of faith in the God who is so very good. As the psalms were originally songs that were sung in worship and praise to God, Psalm 46 is a song of confidence and a song of trust that God is always there, always with us.

Verse 1 states that “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” As a *refuge*, this statement affirms that God is safe and reliable, and God is worthy of our trust. As a *strength*, it affirms that God is sovereign and powerful—that God is truly and powerfully “for us,” never against us, always advocating for our nurture and well-being. And, as a very present *help*, it affirms that God's loving power is inclined toward helping God's people in both the very best of times and the very worst of times and at every time in between. Because God truly is our hope, and God can be trusted. God is always a reliable refuge, even when the very structures of the universe, of our universe as we know it, cannot be depended upon—when it seems like our world is falling apart, as it may have felt for you during periods in your life—God can indeed be trusted, and God is our hope!

And, this is why I deeply believe that this beginning affirmation in Psalm 46 so perfectly captures who we are as children of God here at First Presbyterian

Church. It speaks to who we all have been up to this point. It speaks to who we are right now, in this moment ... together. And, it speaks to who we will continue to be going forward. For God's people in this place, at this time, we proclaim that God has been, and indeed still is, our refuge and strength, and God has been our very present and well-proved help in times of trouble.

### **Be Still and Know**

I confess to you now that Psalm 46 has been my prayer for this congregation from ever since before I began serving here over 14 months ago because within this piece of God's Word lies hope and a promise, particularly verse 10 when it implores us to "be still and know that I am God." My prayer has been that this congregation would discover the capacity to persevere and find focus and know that God was here with you and that God was working for you as we move into an unknown future.

You see, Psalm 46 has been a source of strength, consolation, and hope to believers and Christ-followers throughout the centuries—to those who have moved from one unknown future into another, and it should be a source of strength and hope for us, too, right now ... and in every moment to come.

### **Christ the King Sunday**

Speaking of things coming up ... the holidays approach. Thanksgiving is this coming week, and Christmas is only one month from tomorrow, which means the season of Advent beckons. But, before we embark on the season of expectation next week, we must first pause on this Christ the King Sunday—to recognize Jesus the Christ as our true source of hope and strength, and to recognize the promise we receive from God that God, "Emmanuel," is indeed with us.

Speaking of Emmanuel, the last verse of the psalm promises that "the Lord of hosts is with us"—a promise that extends from Christmas to the cross, and on this last Sunday before Advent, when we might already be tempted to focus on Christmas, we find ourselves back at Good Friday as it were, jolted by the cross. But, that's what Luke gives us today—Jesus on the cross. And, two other men are with him—one is hardened and scornful and cynical, and the other is searching and discerning and hopeful; out of despair, one criminal resorts to ridiculing Jesus

while the other criminal resorts to surrender and faith. He speaks to Jesus from a posture of prayer, of trust, and of hope.

And, then comes from the mouth of Jesus a single, powerful promise, echoing from today's Psalm 46 throughout history—*I am with you*. I will be with you always. You are not ever alone, as he said to that man on the cross to his side, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

All of our wilderness wanderings, all of our frustrations and fatigue, all of our broken hearts, all of our doubts and uncertainties we have ever harbored in our hearts are held by this promise from God ... that the God of grace, the God of love, and the God of mercy will never, ever abandon us!

This is the hope and the strength that will carry all of us forward from here ... because we have places to go and people to serve in God's name. So let's get ready for Advent and let's get ready for the future!

Thanks be to God! Amen.