

Space Of Refuge

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Psalm 46

How many of you have been hiking in the mountains for multiple days in extreme conditions, perhaps in cold and snow? Or perhaps you have been hiking in the wilderness out beyond the trails where day-hiker tourist trek.

If you are going hiking in the wilderness you need to take along some essentials. The National Park Foundation recommends that you have a GPS and compass app on your phone along with a battery powered charger. They also recommend taking a detailed paper map, in case things go awry with your phone, so that you know the trails, the camp sites, and where you can find water sources.

Among all of your survival gear, you will need to pack food, utensils, an assortment of clothes and shoes for different temperatures and terrain, toiletries, tent, sleeping bag, first aid kit, knife, flashlight, and matches.

You need to pack lightly and efficiently because you have to carry everything on your back. Oh,

and don't forget to tell someone who is not traveling with you where you are going.

As prepared as you might be, there is always the chance there will be an emergency, so you have to be prepared because it is unlikely anyone could be at your aid within a half hour to help you.

Packing water of course is important, especially if you are in an arid environment like the desert.

Now imagine you are in the desert and you go to get a drink and realize your water supply has leaked. You look around and see no water source to replenish your supply. You might become desperate and panic a bit and press on with heightened anxiety.

Imagine what that might feel like.

But then, you come around a rocky outcrop and see in front of you an oasis in the desert, complete with shade and a wonderful pool of fresh water.

Imagine how relieved you are to find something that you are sure now can sustain you. Indeed you will have everything you need from that water pool. It is more precious than gold.

You know that you will be able to make it, because you have found a refuge for your safety and that will provide for you even amid the inhospitable environment of the desert.

An oasis ... a refuge.

Perhaps the desert is a metaphor for some challenge or difficult situation in your life right now and you don't know how you might survive in that desert.

As a young family with children and all of the life pressures that come along with it, what might your desert be?

Hold that feeling for a moment now.

I want you to know how God is working here in our church. Long before we came upon the name "Sanctuary" as a possible new name for our church, I went to a retreat center to plan the focus of sermons from this fall through next spring.

The sermon scripture I selected for this Sunday just happened to be Psalm 46, which talks about God being a space of refuge, a safe place, a respite, a space of healing and rejuvenation, an oasis in the

desert — a space of sanctuary — God is our sanctuary.

Listen for how this ancient poem/song might speak to us today.

READ PSALM 46

One of the foundational ideas in this psalm is that God's presence is marked by safety and peace — in the midst of natural disasters, and in the midst of political turmoil, wars and threats of conflict.

Both of these scenarios typically have people recoil in fear in the face of something that seems much beyond their control.

The assumption is that if God's presence means safety and peace in situations far beyond us, certain it also means peace in those situations that are closer to home — like broken relationships, financial pressure and stress, pressure to keep up with standards and expectations among your peers, uncertainty about life direction, or whatever unrest we might find in our environment.

This psalm says that God's help is coming right to us in the middle of whatever unrest we face.

So today we reaffirm on the promise of this psalm that God's presence is already here with this

congregation in the midst of any fears and unrest we might feel. God is now among us, feeling our pain as we birth something new in this city.

It is God's presence that offers the greatest promise of hope for our future.

Following the beautiful poetic expression of the psalm, we affirm that there is a river that flows from God's grace and love that is even now nourishing the seeds of ministry that are rolling around in our minds and hearts inside this dream, this vision for young families in this area.

What encouragement is it for you to know that regardless of what we currently see, God has already provided everything we need for a new and vital ministry with young families in Birmingham?

The final verses of this passage are some of the most powerful words that I have found in the whole Bible. They are spoken right into the middle of a world that seems out of control and crumbling in a hurry.

In the middle of all the change that might feel like we are losing everything that is familiar, we can stop for a moment and take stock of what is now true — what has

already been provided for us, whether we see it yet or not. It says to ...

*“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.*

God is our safe place. God is our refuge. God is our sanctuary!

We know that we have a daunting task ahead of us. It will be a lot of work and perhaps a challenge like no other that we have faced in any church we may have attended.

But let us collectively pause ... and take take a deep breath. ... Know that God has already given us what we need to grow a thriving congregation in this place.

Julia faced the lonely and stressful time after her husband was deployed to Iraq. It was like she was alone in the desert without what she needed. Parenting without her husband was a distinct challenge, but it was particularly difficult for Julia when her teenage son was dumped by his girlfriend.

He sank into a deep depression and seemed to be at the end of his rope. Julia didn't know what to do. She called his school counselor

and the counselor watched out for him during the day at school.

Her son discovered that his mom called the school and he was so angry when he got home that he stormed into his bedroom and slammed the door.

Julia was beside herself, looking for some foothold, for something she could do that might make a difference, but she was coming up completely empty and felt helpless. She was in her desert thinking she had no resources that would help.

So Julia prayed. It was all she knew to do in this desert of hers. The message she received from God was to be still and quiet — she didn't need to say anything, but just be present.

She slowly opened her son's bedroom door, which surprisingly was unlocked. She found him laying on the floor staring off into space. She laid down next to him, not to close, but not too far away. She stayed right there for what seemed like hours not saying anything — just being there, present and open.

She finally stretched her pinky finger over to touch his hand, to simply make a connection. Just as she did, he grasped her hand and said "Mom, my heart is breaking."

He hugged her and tears began to flow from both of their eyes.

Perhaps she had just become the refuge for her son in his desert. The first step in a much longer journey had just begun.

How powerful can it be to find that what you need in your fearful situation is something that you had all along?

Sometimes all we need to do is slow down and be present.

How wonderful is it to feel lacking some essential resource to move forward, and then realize that what you thought was lacking is right in front of you and available?

As human beings we are so short-sighted sometimes. We fear and we shrink because of what we think is missing.

How amazing might it be to feel the weight, burden, and tension inside you related to an unknown future simply dissolve?

How powerful might it be when God opens your eyes to know that what you feared was not only not real, but need not be a barrier?

How powerful, how amazing, how wonderful is our God, our refuge, our sanctuary!