

Jonathan L Walton, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals, Harvard University

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early. The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth. He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire. Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge

Searching for a New Home

We are living through a period of national uncertainty and social unrest. Economic inequality has not been this high since the Great Depression. The gap between the super wealthy and the poor is rendering the American middle class obsolete.

The prison industrial complex is out of control. Over the past forty years our nation has locked up more black and brown people than South Africa at the height of apartheid. And currently we have 500k more people behind prison bars than China, though they have five times the population.

And this nation elected a reality television star President of the United States. That the vast majority of Americans and global citizens regard the current president as woefully incompetent, emotionally unstable, and morally uncouth is a severe indictment on all of us.

The United States is going through an identity crisis. We know that white and male supremacy is on its deathbed. But for those who are committed to living in the past. And for those who seek to “Make America Great Again,” they want to make hospice care as expensive as possible.

We know that a healthy democracy cannot survive with two categories of people: Those who can afford quality housing, education, and basic services, and those who cannot. Yet we continue to think that if we elect, defend, and support the rich and powerful, somehow their wealth will trickle down to the masses.

And we know that our belief that somehow our citizenship is tied to consumerism, and that the more we have, the better off we are is an empty promise. We all know this. Yet, how many of us continue to spend money we don't have, to buy things we don't need, to impress people that we don't even know.

Our nation is at a crossroads. We are having to reckon with some ugly truths.

We are having to admit that our national drug epidemic is not the pathological province of "those people" in that neighborhood. It never has been.

We are having to admit that the spike in mortality rates among white working class brothers and sisters is the price of a longstanding lie. Exploitation has always been an equal opportunity employer.

And we are having to admit that this nation's most privilege classes don't care anything about national borders. So many live between countries across Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Millions of people are wanting to check out. Millions of Americans have had it up to here. Millions of folk are "Searching for a New Home."

The plight of our nation today bears some resemblance to the plight and perils of another community. This feeling of social displacement and political catastrophe should sound familiar. Why?-because it is the ongoing story and constant struggle of ancient Israel.

Thumb through the pages of the Hebrew Bible. We encounter a people whose identity and existence is always under threat.

Peruse from the Pentateuch through the Prophets. You will see a people who are constantly negotiating changing circumstances and volatile conditions.

Take a ride with Abraham's seed through bondage in Egypt; experience the populist revolt against Moses by the masses; break into Canaan land with Joshua and Caleb; experience the corruption of Israel's own self-serving king's; and get ushered off into exile somewhere in Assyria and Babylon.

When you spend some time living in the narrative of Israel's sacred history, you might find yourself empathizing with the prophet Elijah singing, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a

strange land?" You might find yourself weeping with the prophet Jeremiah, "The harvest is passed. The summer is ended, and we are not saved." (8:20) Or you might just cry out in frustration like the prophet Habakkuk, "How long, Oh Lord?"

What all these deep and profound personalities share in common is their longing and desire to find a new home.

That was Abraham. When he couldn't take the evil and corruption of idolatry in his land, he knew there had to be something better and more beautiful than this. So he went out searching.

That was Moses. When he could no longer endure witnessing God's children enslaved and exploited, he went out into the wilderness searching.

That was Ezekiel. When God lifted him out into a graveyard and showed him the skeletal remains of what was once a prosperous nation—a nation that was brought to ruins by self-serving leaders and cowardly, co-opted priests, Ezekiel began searching. He mined the depths of his despair and tapped into his moral imagination. From here he was able to see a new kingdom full of possibility and potential. A kingdom where dry bones can live again.

I cite Abraham. I cite Moses. I cite Ezekiel here because they all share this in common. When confronted by unsettling social and political conditions, and when tormented by even more dismal prospects for the future, they searched for a new home; and they searched for it in their dreams.

This is why I selected the 46th Psalm. The Psalms had a particular and distinct role in ancient Israel. They represented sophisticated poetry and depicted new possibility. No matter how dreary the day. No matter how long the night. No matter how amiss the historical moment may be. The psalmist paints an inspirational portrait of God's will for justice, righteousness, and peace.

This is what we see in the 46th Psalm. The poet is presenting us a vision of a new home. We don't know when it was written. Nor do we know the particular circumstance to which the poet is responding. But it doesn't matter. You take your pick. Enslavement. Exile. Economic exploitation. Unbridled injustice. Ancient Israel endured it all. Yet despite all of that, the poet was still able to sing, "God is our refuge and strength. God is a very present help in the time of trouble. Therefore we will not fear. Though the earth should change. Though the mountains will shake. Though the waters will roar and foam. God is still in the midst of the city."

In times of trial and tumult in our nation and world, we can find comfort and inspiration here. As people of faith, the most important question is never where we stand politically in terms of partisan politics. Nor should the primary questions be about national identity. Such fragile allegiances are little more than crass idolatry. There is a deeper, more fundamental question for us. Where do we stand in relationship to God's kingdom? Are we first and foremost residents in the city of Greenville, Atlanta, or even the United States? Or are we first and foremost residents in the City of God?

Let me be clear. I am not appealing to some sort of otherworldliness or spiritual escapism here. But rather we know that the Kingdom of God makes eternal demands upon us that should shape our temporary orientations in this kingdom.

**The kingdom of God encourages us to:
honor service over celebrity,
extend compassion rather than seek power,
and to concern ourselves with what we can give rather than what we can gain.**

Might this be a source of the wedge that is bitterly dividing our nation today? Futile appeals to white nationalism, male supremacy, and all other ideologies of the socially insecure will only hasten the destruction of this temporal kingdom. Desperate people trying to reclaim a home what was never theirs in the first place.

Yet when I read the 46th Psalm, I am reminded that I am in search of a different kind of home. A home that is not subject to the vacillations and vicissitudes of life. A home that is built on the solid foundation of righteousness, justice, and love. And a home whose doors swing on welcome hinges, and that provides VIP passes to the most vulnerable.

So I have stopped by here this morning to encourage all of the dreamers in the house. Somebody who realizes that God is our refuge and our strength, an ever present help in the time of trouble. Dreamers who know that though kingdoms will rise and fall, justice and truth pressed down to the earth will rise again. Dreamers who are searching for a new home. Dreamers who can lift their voices and say:

Come we that love the lord, and let our joys be known.

Join in a song with sweet accord, and thus surround the throne.

For the men of grace have found that glory has begun below.

Heavenly fruits on earthly ground, for its from faith that hope may grow.

We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion;

We're marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God.