

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, May 29, 2016
Palm Sunday**

OUR FORTRESS, OUR STRENGTH

Psalm 46:1-11

Three weeks ago today, Maryanne and I were in the southern Spanish city of Malaga in Seville Province not far from Gibraltar. While we were there we went to church at the cathedral, which was an interesting experience. We were surprised to see that it was full. Not what you normally hear about, even in Catholic Europe these days. But it was. It was full. There were at least as many tourists, I suspect, as parishioners, but it was full and the Word was proclaimed in a magnificent building.

In addition to that, we also went to a fortress. We went to a 13th-century building that had been constructed by the Moors, the Muslims who ruled Spain from the 8th century through the 15th. It was an impressive building. Wonderful stonework, beautiful gardens. As well as being a military installation it was also where people lived when it was a fortress, so it was decorated and it had a great deal of Muslim artwork, stonework that was in the form of geometric patterns as Muslim art normally is. It was solid. It looked like it could withstand assault even today. And it's a museum. It's not a military installation anymore. For all of its marshal feeling, it's a museum. It's a place where people from Seville and all over the world can visit and see a piece of Spain's history that is long in the past. And the reason it's long in the past, of course, is because near the end of the 15th century the Moors were expelled from Spain. Their conquest was reversed and the fortress that had stood as such a mighty testimony to their power was indeed overthrown.

That's the case with all of humanity's marshal achievements. There is no such thing as a military that can never be defeated. Sad to say, we've even seen that of our own within our lifetimes. There is no military achievement of humanity that will stand up for all the ages. And that being the case, even as we acknowledge and even as we appreciate sacrifices of military men and women, including the ultimate sacrifice, over the last two plus centuries on behalf of the freedom and liberty of these United States, I call us this morning to remember that even these achievements are not forever. Because in fact there is but one Fortress that will stand forever. There is but one Shield that will never be broken. And that, of course, is the Lord our God.

To see that I ask that we turn to Psalm 46 and that we do so not in the spirit of denigrating anyone who has ever served in our military. We celebrate them. But rather to see that beyond their penultimate efforts there is an ultimate effort and an ultimate Warrior who goes on behalf of His people for their protection and ultimately for their salvation. "God is our refuge and strength," we're told in verse 1. "God is our refuge," which is another way of saying He's our shelter. The word used for refuge there can be translated that way. That speaks of a covering. A covering from rain or from the

elements. One not unlike the Tabernacle or like a home. A place in which one can get out of the elements and find protection from them.

That's one way in which God is referred to in this Psalm. He is the One who protects us. He's also referred to as our strength. And strength refers to His power and might that is exerted both in the pursuit of His own will and purposes and on behalf of His people. On behalf of His people. It particularly refers to the way that He fights against powers that stand against us. He fights against our adversaries whether they be the powers of darkness, Satan and sin and the world, or even the natural world as it comes against us. And therefore, in verse 2 we are told, "Therefore we will not fear." We will not fear because there is no need to fear if one is protected by our Lord.

I was struck by something Chris Zickmund told us before about the couple engaged in sports ministry in Brussels. There in the midst of a horrendous terrorist attack they were protected by God. He had a purpose for them and a future for them and nothing was going to come against that. Not the bombs of ISIS or anything else that might seek to obstruct their way. They were protected and so they could go into that airport and, I pray, in the future go into that airport and will not fear. Because the worst that the world can throw at them is as nothing compared to what God is standing before them. "Even though," the writer says, "the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, the waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging." It's not just what man can do to us that God protects us from. It is also even the elements of earth themselves. We are protected even against the earthquake and the tornado, even against the hurricane and great cold.

Now does that mean that they will never affect us? That they will never hurt us physically? That they might not ever kill us? No, it doesn't mean that. There was no absolute guarantee to the Youngs in the Brussels airport. If you go in there it doesn't matter how many bombs ISIS explodes, you're going to walk right through it the way Jesus walked through the crowd that wanted to harm Him. It does not mean that if you stand on the side of Mt. St. Helen's the next time it erupts that God is going to keep you miraculously safe from the lava that flows down its side. This is no guarantee against our own foolishness nor is it meant to be a guarantee against our mortality. It is to say, however, that God and His purposes for us cannot be defeated. That's why the Youngs were spared in the Brussels airport. Not merely by chance, obviously. And not simply because they happened to be standing behind something that might have shielded them from part of the blast, as they might have been. Certainly not because of their own efforts. But because God still has use of them in the world. He could receive their praises just as easily at the foot of His throne in heavenly places. But He still had use for them, purpose for them, desire for their service here in the world and so there was nothing on that occasion that God would have permitted to allow His purposes to be thwarted.

The same thing can be said of natural disasters. Hurricane, earthquake, if God desires our service and our praises in this world, if He desires our witness to Him in our own community or anywhere in the globe, if He has lives for us to touch, we will be protected.

Not because God plays favorites, but because God has purposes. And not because we're special, though we all are as elect people, but because we're His servants.

So, not only do we look to Him as the One who will protect us from natural disasters, there's more. He says that there's a river and that there is a stream, but let's hold onto that in verses 4 and 5. Let's go to 6 and 7 because not only is there this natural world that is looking to harm us in a multitude of unconscious ways almost every day. There are fellow human beings. Verses 6 and 7 make clear that earthly powers are no threat to us as well. "Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall. He lifts His voice and the earth melts." The world's powers can and do rage against God and His people but they cannot harm us. Yes, they can deliver our bodies to be burned. Yes, they can hang us. I don't need to go into all of the ways that the world's powers can come at us physically. The truth is that chaos may engulf society but that can't harm us either.

The idea here is that we cannot be separated from God or from His purposes for us. There are, sad to say, hundreds, thousands, countless Christians throughout the Middle East who are feeling the wrath of the world's powers of darkness. I saw something this past week, a video posted by ISIS, of a twelve-year-old girl being executed by them. Her last words were words of faith. I can't imagine being in that position and responding to the knowledge of imminent death in that way, but she did. And I can only imagine the rage that that must have engendered in her executioners. To see the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ at work in their midst no matter what they did. Killing her only meant that they delivered her into the hands of her Father. She knew, whether she thought of these words or not, the truth, I'm sure, of what Paul wrote in Romans 8 when he says, "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." That includes ISIS. That includes atheism. That includes communism. That includes any "ism" you care to mention that would come against us. That includes any threat that the world would seek to destroy us with. We cannot be separated from Him. Yes, they may kill the body, as Martin Luther so eloquently wrote. They may kill the body but they cannot kill us.

Now the counterpoint to the dangers presented by both the natural world and the world of men is found in verses 4 and 5: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall. God will help her at break of day." Now to what is the psalmist referring? The chances are pretty good that he's referring to Jerusalem. The Jordan does not run through Jerusalem, but the picture that he gives us is one that almost certainly in Jewish or Israelite ears would have conjured up a vision of Jerusalem and the place where God dwells as the Temple. But we who live on the other side of Christ's resurrection as members of His Kingdom in this world can hear this in a little bit different way. The city of God is the Kingdom. The city of God is the Kingdom in which we now dwell. You've heard the expression, I'm sure, that comes from one of John's letters, that we are to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. In the same way that three weeks ago Maryanne and I were in Malaga but were not of the European Union. We were still American

citizens. In the same way we reside in this world but our citizenship is in the city of God. Or the Kingdom of God. The river whose streams make glad the city is a picture of contrast with what was described in verse 3. “Though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.” This is the enemy, as it were. This is the natural world that in its fallenness might come against you. Not consciously, obviously, but might in fact do so in the form of earthquake or hurricane or tornado. The river whose streams make glad the Kingdom. That’s a world that has been transformed. A world in which the natural world no longer threatens.

The city in verse 5 that will not fall stands in contrast to the raging nations that are mentioned in verse 6. And this is one of the reasons why I say that as Christians, and particularly those who lived even later than the 6th century B.C., we have to recognize that when the writer says, “She will not fall,” if we assume that he is talking about Jerusalem, he is talking about a city that *did* fall. And where the dwelling of God was destroyed. And yet he assures us that won’t happen. And the reason is that because the God who is the ruler of the city in which we dwell, the God who is the fortress that protects us, He cannot fall. He cannot fail. His protection is eternal. The picture we get in verses 4-5 is one of stability and security and it’s summed up in the verse that provided Martin Luther with his inspiration for “A Mighty Fortress.” The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our Fortress. The walls around the old city of Jerusalem were all fine and good, but they couldn’t stand up to the armies of Babylonia. The wall that surrounds us, the protection that we stand under is subject to the power of no military force and cannot be overcome even by the most powerful spiritual force that comes against it. The God of Jacob is our Fortress and as such is forever.

In verses 8-10, God takes away our fear by taking action. In verse 8 we’re told, “Come and see the works of the Lord, the desolations He has brought on the earth.” He brings judgment, which is another way of referring to the desolations there, against all that stands against Him, against Satan and all his hosts. He brings judgment against all worldly powers that would deny Him and oppose Him. He brings judgment against the sin that would keep us from being His children if it could. All of them are judged. All of them ultimately destroyed. He brings the conflict of nations to an end. Verse 9: “He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the shields with fire.” It’s amazing to think that words like this could be penned in an age when war, when conflict between nations and tribes and clans was an everyday occurrence.

I read once that someone had actually gone through (I’m not exactly how he did this with the ancient world) to see how many years in the last 4,000 have not had any recorded conflict, any recorded war, anywhere in the world in recorded history. Do you know how many of those 4,000 years that historian found were without “recorded” conflict? Two hundred and sixty-seven. Two hundred and sixty-seven out of 4,000. Now that is *recorded* conflict. I’d say that the chances that in the rest of the world, the world that did not record its history in the year 1932 B.C., there may have been such a conflict going on as well. And yet here, in this psalm, we’re told that He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. Well, gee, God, you’re not doing such a hot job of it are you? You know, if

this is the God who is going to fight the war to end all wars, He certainly hasn't done so in the last 4,000 years, has He?

This is not meant to describe conditions today. This is, instead, meant to describe the conditions to come in the Kingdom of God. When the Kingdom of God is here in its fullness and not only all creation but all of our world has been renewed, yes, wars will cease to the very ends of the earth. Now remember, the Kingdom of God is not here in its fullness, but it is already here and we are citizens of it. And so for us, the wars that rage outside, even for those of us who take part in those wars by virtue of our role in the military, those wars are secondary. Because for us the most important war has already been won. For us there is no longer any need to fear the enemies who would stand against us. For us the powers of sin and Satan and the world no longer have power over us. For us that war is effectively over. That doesn't mean it can't nick us or harm us in any way or form, but we already know how that war ends. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth.

Look inside, people of God. That war is over. He won it on our behalf. And in the process He exalts Himself. In verse 10, "I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth." All of creation will know that He is Lord. One day the people who tried to kill the Youngs in Brussels will stand before the Lord and acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. They'll do it through gritted teeth and without hope of salvation. But they *will* acknowledge that. They *will* exalt Him because they will know, to their everlasting detriment, who He is. As will all the powers that stand against Him.

So what does that leave for us? This is obviously a psalm of praise and proclamation. It tells us a great deal about who God is and the way He relates to the world around us and the way that He protects us, the way He benefits His children. So what's our response? In verse 10, "Be still and know that I am God." That's hard. Because we want to always be doing. That's one thing that you can say about Americans. We always want to be up and at it. We don't want to be hanging around waiting for things to happen. We want to make them happen. We have an almost cultural lack of patience and it comes up every day. You've seen it in yourself. You've seen it in people around you. We want to move. We want to get going! And He says, "Be still." Stop what you're doing. Stop your fury of activity. Stop trying to find all the answers on your own. Most of all stop trying to be the center of the universe, even your own. "Stop! And know that I," He says, "am God. I am your Fortress. I am your Shield and Defender. I am your King and Lord. I am the source of your life, the giver of all good things. I," He says, "am your God." Be still and know.