

**Songs of the Heart:
GOD WILL NEVER FAIL YOU!**

Psalm 46:1-11

Trusting in God, we can live in the turmoil.

A sermon preached by
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Here's your summer health tip for the day: Stay hydrated. Drink plenty of water. Especially in the heat of summer, it's easy to get low on fluids. That's part of the reason I have a glass of water nearby when I preach—that and to protect my throat. Different health advisors will tell you to drink eight or more glasses of water every day. I'll admit I usually don't drink that much water; you have to be very intentional to make that happen. You have to consciously pause several times a day and drink for your health. But you know what I have discovered? The pause is healthy, too. I have found that in order to drink a glass of water, you also have to take a deep breath. I think I need the deep breath as much as the water.

A few years ago a researcher did a study that showed about 40% of Christians worldwide feel like their lives are rushed, that they hurry from task to task on a regular basis. And 60% of Christians worldwide feel that the busyness of their lives is detrimental to their relationship with God. The percentages were slightly higher in North America. I'm sure the numbers would be even higher today.

Interestingly, the professional group that felt the most rushed and most damaged in their relationship with God were—can you guess?—pastors. Over half of pastors felt rushed from task to task, and nearly two-thirds felt their hectic lifestyles made it harder to develop their relationship with God. The researcher who conducted the study said, "It's tragic and ironic: the very people who could best help us escape the bondage of busyness are themselves in chains."¹

Pastors and every other Christian need to learn the practice of intentionally stopping for a moment and pausing to reflect on the goodness of God. We all get spiritually dehydrated, and we need to quench our thirst for God. We need to rehydrate our spirits throughout the day. The ancients called it "practicing the presence of God." Like a cool drink of water, we need to remember the refreshing presence of the Holy Spirit as we go about our busy activities.

We need this because the world around us is in constant turmoil. The pace of change has accelerated to phenomenal levels. Technology has

radically altered our lifestyle. Politically, the world is in turmoil: wars, terrorism, trade wars, immigration conflicts. Do I need to make a list? Then there's the usual turmoil that every person faces: relationships, illness, grief, all those personal struggles.

The church has its own share of turmoil. The United Methodist Church will make some decisions in the next few months that could alter the course of our denomination. In a few weeks, we will have some informational meetings to discuss the choices that lie before us. The challenges are formidable.

But apart from all that, as we try to be in ministry to a rapidly changing culture, the church has to adapt how we present the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost and broken world. We have to speak the Good News in terms the unchurched people can understand, or the church will become irrelevant in today's world. Worship, music, education, children's and youth ministries, communication—none of that is the same as it was even ten years ago.

Change produces anxiety; anxiety produces fear; and fear is the opposite of faith. One writer wrote, "Not in the lifetime of most men has there been so much grave and deep apprehension. ...The domestic economic situation is in chaos. Our dollar is weak throughout the world. Prices are so high as to be utterly impossible. Of our troubles man can see no end." The source of that quote? *Harper's Weekly*, 1857!

So change, anxiety, and fear are not a new problem. In fact the Psalmist was dealing with it in his day and time. Political and economic turmoil was common. Invading armies brought oppression and war to their doorsteps on a regular basis. Life was a battle for survival. What was a faithful person to do? "*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*"²

How do we live without fear? How do we reduce our anxiety? How do we live by faith in the midst of turmoil? We remember the message

of this wonderful psalm: “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*”³ The first verse is re-emphasized twice by the refrain, “*The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*”⁴ God is bigger than our fear; God is greater than our trouble; God is with us in the middle of the storm, and God will not let us go. Take a deep breath and drink in those verses about eight times a day, and you won’t be afraid.

One of the classic stories that grew out of the civil rights struggle was a play by Lorraine Hansberry called *A Raisin in the Sun*. The play was made into a movie, and it has been revived on stage and screen several times. It was about an African-American family trying to live their dreams and maintain their hopes in the changing society of America in the 1950’s. There was a strong mother figure and two grown children. The daughter, Beneatha, had been to college and was very “modern” in her thinking. In one unforgettable conversation, she announced to her mother that God was simply an outdated concept: “It’s all a matter of ideas, and God is one idea I just don’t accept. There is simply no blasted God.”

Mama stared in shock at what had just come out of her daughter’s mouth. Then, mustering all the righteous wrath from deep inside her soul, she got in Beneatha’s face and said, “Child, you say after me, ‘In my mother’s house there is still God!’”

There was a long silence. Beneatha looked sullenly at the fire in her mama’s eyes. Finally, realizing the passion of her mother’s faith and the power that faith had given her mother through all the changes she had seen, Beneatha repeated quietly, “In my mother’s house there is still God.”⁵

In my house there is still God! In our church there is still God. In the world there is still God. God is our refuge and strength and a very present help in trouble. No matter how things change, don’t you ever forget that.

For the Psalmist and the Jews, the special place of God was in the Holy City: “*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,*

the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved.”⁶ The Jews still feel that way about Jerusalem. Although the Temple has been built and destroyed three times, and Jerusalem has been in the hands of a variety of rulers, still God is present there in a significant way. You can still go to the Western Wall of the Temple Mount and pray in the place where the *shekinah*, the glorious presence of God, has resided since the last Temple was destroyed 2,000 years ago.

Place can be important to your faith: a sanctuary, a prayer spot, someplace you feel close to God. But for us Christians, it’s not so much about a place as it is a Person. We know God is with us because God “*became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*”⁷ We know the Lord of Hosts is with us because Jesus came to live among us and showed us the love of the Father. Our strength, our assurance, our faith in the midst of turmoil come from knowing him. It’s not about the religion; it’s about the relationship.

Buzz Stevens is a retired Methodist pastor in Arizona. Early in his ministry, he made a hospital visit that changed his life. Young pastor Buzz came to the door of the hospital room and saw an old woman sitting on her bed with her head bent over. Thinking perhaps she was sick or in a great deal of pain, he started to leave. But she saw him out of the corner of her eye and said, “Come on in, pastor. I was just counting my blessings. Please stay.”

As they visited, Buzz learned that the woman had recently lost her husband of 40 years, that her only son’s family was moving to a remote part of the country, and that she would lose frequent contact with her only granddaughter. Buzz was surprised enough to say, “And you were counting your blessings?”

The elderly church member replied, “Well, yes, pastor. You see, Jesus is at the center of my heart, and that gives me all I need not only to make it through this life, but to enjoy it on the way.”

Many times we pastors discover that the people we are sent to help end up helping us more than we help them. The patient perceived the awed reaction of her young pastor and said, “Close your mouth, Reverend. This old girl is OK!”⁸

We are OK, because God is our refuge, a very present help in trouble, a steadfast fortress when we face anxiety or fear or grief or despair—“A mighty fortress is our God!” We can trust in God, and that gives us power to live confidently in the turmoil.

What is our response to this Good News? The Psalmist tells us by quoting God: “*Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.*”⁹ The key to living faithfully is to be still and know God, to develop a quiet center, a deep place in your soul where you can meet God on a regular basis, a refuge *from* the world that allows you to live *in* the world and deal with the turmoil. Be still in your spirit.

The late Dr. Norman Vincent Peale had a friend who was a captain on an aircraft carrier in World War II. On a trip to Pearl Harbor, the massive ship was loaded with thousands of gallons of extra fuel, all stored on the hangar deck. As the captain slowly steered the huge vessel through a narrow channel into the inner harbor, a merchant ship started through the same channel on its way out. It was going to be extremely tight.

At that moment, the junior executive officer burst onto the bridge and shouted, “Captain, there’s a fire on the hangar deck!” That was serious. With all that extra fuel, a fire on the hangar deck could blow the ship out of the water and kill hundreds of men. Thinking the captain hadn’t heard him, the junior officer shouted again, “Captain, there’s a fire on the hangar deck!”

Without raising his voice or taking his eyes off the approaching merchant ship, the captain said, “I heard you the first time. Put it out.”¹⁰ I wonder if the junior officer hadn’t thought of that!

When we are trying to navigate the tough waters of life and the passage is tricky, we can trust God to guide us through. When the fires

of life ignite, and the danger is high, and we are in a state of panic, we can go to that calm center and hear the Voice say to our spirit, “Be still, and know that I am God.” Living out of that peaceful center, we can then put out the fire.

One of the highlights of our recent vacation was to visit the 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York City. It was a sobering and inspiring experience to remember the events of September 11, 2001. Nearly 3,000 people were killed and over 6,000 injured the day terrorists flew jets into the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon. It was a day the world changed.

One of the survivors was Genelle Guzman, a 31-year-old office manager who worked on the 64th floor of the first tower that was hit. She immediately called her boyfriend, Roger McMillan, and told him she was going to stay put. Later she decided to try to get out of the building. When she was in the stairwell on the 13th floor, the building collapsed around her. Genelle fell between two pillars, concrete on both sides of her head, but still alive. For 26 hours, she was forced to be still as she waited for rescue. She had never really prayed before, but the more she did, the more she felt her faith in God growing. “I just wanted a second chance at life,” she said. “I wanted to be with my family. I knew my life was going to change as I prayed for a miracle. I realized that I was still breathing, and I knew that God had a plan for my life. I knew He was going to answer my prayer.”

Genelle Guzman was the last person pulled alive out of the wreckage of the World Trade Center. Her boyfriend Roger said that the ordeal was a life-changing experience: “Before, we went to church on a couple of occasions. It’s something you put off. But Genelle already stated in the hospital bed that this is her calling to God.”¹¹

Genelle was in the hospital several weeks and had multiple surgeries on her damaged leg. But she accepted Christ in the rubble of the World Trade Center. Her boyfriend Roger also became a Christian. When she got out of the hospital, they were baptized and married on the same day.

Then they became faithful members of the Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York City.¹²

I hope you never have to have a building crash down around your ears to get right with God. Genelle had 26 hours to be still and know. Many on that day never got that chance. But today you have a chance. You can know that the Lord of Hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge. God will never fail us. You can live in the turmoil—and enjoy the ride.

¹ Michael Zigarelli, "Survey: Christians Worldwide Too Busy For God," *www.christianpost.com*.

² Psalm 46:2-3.

³ Psalm 46:1.

⁴ Psalm 46:7, 11.

⁵ Lorraine Hansberry, "*A Raisin in the Sun*," (New York: Random House, 1958), 39. Movie starring Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee, Columbia Pictures, 1961.

⁶ Psalm 46: 4-5.

⁷ John 1:14.

⁸ From a sermon by Dr. Brian Bauknight.

⁹ Psalm 46:10.

¹⁰ Source unknown, "Thriving on Chaos," sermon preached May 26, 1996.

¹¹ John Cloud, "In a Dark Time, Light," *Time*, September 24, 2001.

¹² http://www.moodyconferences.com/con_mainPage.aspx?id=16216.