

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

When the Storms Hit

(Psalm 46)

Study #4

Sermon Series: Learning to Pray
(Studies in selected Psalms)

Introduction: Stormy weather...

Nine days ago, after a few days of a wonderful visit with our son and his family in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Kathy and I were making the long trek back to San Antonio.

It happened to be my birthday as we drove through West Texas. As we drove, we started seeing lightning in the distance. The sky got dark. It got windy. Then the rains came.

We were on a two-lane highway with a 75mph speed limit when we drove into the storm. I slowed to 60, then to 40, then to 20 - which was too fast. I would have stopped altogether but the road didn't have a proper shoulder.

Then, there was an explosion. Actually, it was the sound of an explosion. I heard it in my left ear; Kathy heard it in her right ear.

We believe our car was struck by lightning, which would explain why we lost the radio and couldn't listen to Dave Ramsey and why the radio antenna now looks sorta burned.

Happy birthday, indeed!

The storm that struck followed a script we all know all too well.

All is well on a pleasant drive in the country. All of a sudden, all is not so well. We are alert to looming danger. We hold on to a hope that we'll miss the trouble. That hope disappears. Things get dicey. The heavens open - BAM!

Storms come in all shapes and sizes, and the Bible records a storm that hit the Jewish people in the days when Hezekiah was the king of Judah.

Historical background to Psalm 46 (from 2 Kings 18-19)

Hezekiah, a really good king (2 Kings 18:3)

Hezekiah was one of the most godly kings the Jews ever had. He reigned as king for twenty-nine years in Jerusalem and the Bible says that **[2 Kings 18:3]...he did right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father David had done.**

Hezekiah removed the pagan high places of worship which his people had been using and he cut down the idolatrous symbols of heathenism known as Asherah.

The bronze serpent that Moses had made hundreds of years earlier as a symbol of salvation had become, itself, an idol. So, King Hezekiah destroyed it (see the story in Numbers, chapter 21).

Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. He clung to the Lord and kept His commandments. The Bible tells us that the Lord was with him.

However, even though Hezekiah walked with God, fourteen years into his good reign, a fierce, violent storm blew in from the north.

Assyria, a really wicked, violent empire threatening the Jews

The major political power at this time in world history was the Assyrian Empire, and the king of the Assyrians was Sennacherib. Sennacherib was on the warpath.

Traveling across the Fertile Crescent, his army invaded and destroyed the cities in the hill country of Judah.

So, Hezekiah began paying protection money to Sennacherib to delay his attack on Jerusalem, hoping to turn the storm from the capitol city.

But there was no escaping the Assyrian storm. The time soon came when Sennacherib sent one of his generals, Rabshakeh, south, to attack and to destroy Jerusalem.

With the city surrounded, Rabshakeh delivered a speech that was designed to intimidate.¹ It worked like a charm. The Jews of Jerusalem were thoroughly intimidated.

Rabshakeh told Jewish officials the terrible things that the Assyrian army would do to them in the coming attack.

And when the servants told the king the threats that Rabshakeh had made against them, King Hezekiah **[2 Kings 19:1] tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth and entered the house of the Lord.**

Isaiah, a prophet with a good word from God

The king then sent word to Isaiah the prophet, reporting what Rabshakeh had said. Isaiah received a message from God and gave a two-part “good-news” prophecy that greatly encouraged Hezekiah.

First, he told the king that General Rabshakeh would be called back to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh because of a rumor of trouble in his own land, and that there would be no attack.

Then, he prophesied that King Sennacherib himself - who was in Jerusalem to see the battle (which would never happen) - would be assassinated when he got back home to Nineveh in Assyria.

Now, *keep in mind* that as Isaiah gave this prophecy, there was an army of a couple hundred thousand Assyrian warriors camped all around Jerusalem.

¹ Read the speech in 2 Kings 18.

And *remember* that Assyria was the biggest, baddest, empire in the world. And *don't forget* that Assyria had already laid waste the northern tribes of Israel along with many other nations before this.

I can imagine that the Jews hearing Isaiah's prophecy might have thought *“Nice thoughts. But I can smell the Assyrian army's campfires outside the walls of Jerusalem. What are Isaiah's words against THAT?”*

The people might well have been terrified despite Isaiah's comforting prophecies. So, many Bible scholars believe that it was at this moment that some influential Jewish leaders sat down to write a song.²

The sons of Korah write a faith-filled song (Psalm 46)

These were Levites, religious leaders of Israel who had descended from a man named Korah. The sons of Korah were the officially designated musician's guild in Old Testament Israel.³

It was their job to put the great themes of God's truths to music. They were the hymn-writers and praise song authors. They led the nation in worship, and music was their medium.

And, if we are right in chronologically placing this psalm *before* the fulfillment of the prophecy, they were also men of faith.

I (and many others) believe that this Psalm (Psalm 46) is best read against the backdrop of the setting I've just described.

Isaiah has given a prophetic word from God that Israel would not be harmed by the Assyrians *while* the Assyrian army surrounded the capitol and *while* Rabshakeh's threats were still ringing in the ears of Hezekiah's servants.

² Based on Psalm 46, the German reformer Martin Luther wrote and sang the song with his companions, *“A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” (Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott)* as they entered the Diet (the general assembly of the Holy Roman Empire) of the city of Worms to testify before governmental authorities about his writings.

³ The sons of Korah are mentioned either as the authors or the performers of the psalm. *Alamo* - seems to have been related to soprano or falsetto voices (K-D).

It would be like someone writing a song today celebrating the goodwill that exists between the United States and Iran. That would be a hope-filled song.

Psalm 46 was a song of outrageous, over-the-top hope and faith. And the sons of Korah had plans for this song.

They sent it to the leader of the Jews' national choir and directed that it be performed for the whole community that was facing the Assyrian storm.

I'm going to take the liberty of taking the lines of the Psalm somewhat out of order this morning to help make the point that the sons of Korah are aiming at.

First, we'll listen as they paint a picture of trouble.

Living Without Fear (vv. 1-3)

Catastrophes Will Come... (vv. 2b-3)

*[2b]...though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea;
[3] Though its waters roar and foam,
Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.*

The words suggest nature's convulsions. Think of volcanoes, tsunamis, floods and earthquakes, storms.

These are the kinds of upheavals you think about when a great nation's army is at your city's gates, like Assyria's was at Jerusalem's gates. It is disaster poised to strike.

We know from history that Assyria was a notoriously cruel empire. Its treatment of defeated enemies was barbaric. Assyria swallowed nations whole. Any nation caught in the path of Assyria was terrified of what was going to happen.

Isaiah compared the Assyrian army to a mighty river. It's like the Mississippi at flood stage overflowing its banks, causing desolation, rising till it submerged everything in its path.

We read this and try to put ourselves in the shoes of the Jews who have heard Rabshekah's speech. We can only imagine the thoughts and emotions swirling around in their hearts and minds.

Then again, since "storms" do come in all shapes and sizes, we can do more than imagine.

- We've faced lightning storms in West Texas and we've faced reports from doctors no one would want to hear.
- We've received calls in the middle of the night and updates from family members and friends that have shaken us.
- We've seen news stories - 9/11, the outbreak of war, mass shootings - that have shaken our foundations.

The sons of Korah envision a situation in which the world changes. Life won't be the same anymore. The river is rising. Assyria is coming.

And with all of this going on, our eyes are drawn to other lines in the Psalm's first stanza.

...Yet We Will NOT Fear (vv. 1-2a)

[2a]...we will not fear

To which a Jew of Hezekiah's day might have responded, "*What do you mean, 'We will not fear'? Have you seen that army out there? You're telling us to sing a song with the line 'We will not fear'? Of course, we'll fear. Only a fool WOULD'N'T fear in such a situation.*"

Only a fool OR someone who has Someone on their side strong enough to protect in the day of disaster. And that, says this song, is exactly the situation in which Hezekiah's people find themselves.

Israel didn't have a Trojan horse to parade in front of the Assyrians. She didn't have better weapons. Her horses weren't more numerous and her chariots weren't better built.⁴

⁴ Isaiah reproved his fellow Jews for seeking arms and weapons, horses and chariots from Egypt (Isaiah 31:1) because that action overlooked the real source of their security, which the Psalm makes explicit with the opening words.

They need not fear because:

[1] God is our refuge and strength,

A very present help in trouble.

[2a] Therefore we will not fear

God is present to protect and help.

The Jews of Hezekiah's day need not fear the Assyrian threat. They don't need to rent Egyptian chariots and horses. They will be preserved because they have a sure word of protection in the prophetic word from Isaiah.

Selah...

Now, as you're reading along with me in your Bible or Bible app, at the end of verse 3, you will probably see a word set out on the margin. The word is "*Selah*."

"*Selah*" is a musical annotation that calls for a crescendo, or possibly an interlude.⁵

When it occurs in a psalm, the sense is, "*Stop and let that sink in a minute.*"

So, let's "*selah*" for a moment. Let's think about what this song of the sons of Korah is saying.

Through the prophecy of Isaiah, God had not promised them everything, but He had promised them something.

No individual Jew had a guarantee of personal prosperity, of a long, healthy life, or of good crops in the summer.

But they could be sure that the biggest threat facing the nation would not materialize. Jerusalem would not be destroyed by the Assyrians.

THAT was God's promise and Psalm 46 called them to trust THAT. They were to take courage in what God had explicitly promised.

⁵ *Selah* can also indicate a pause in the performance of a drama.

Selah.

There are lots of things that concern us these days and there are plenty of storms that blow our way. And, about many of these storms we don't have a promise from God.

I can't find a promise in the Bible that your health will always be good or that your career will take off like a rocket. I find no promises of a continually thriving United States of America in the Bible (nations come and go...)

But we do have sure and certain promises from God.

- If you have put your trust in the Lord Jesus for eternal life, you have nothing to fear for evermore. You will never be condemned by God. Your sins are forgiven. You are God's child.
- If you are God's child and live for Jesus, you will experience rich abundance in this life. After this life is over, God will richly reward you for your faithfulness here and now. Your service and love for others will bring a smile to your Savior's face and you'll hear "*Well done*" from the One who loves you best.

The further we move from the central things in life, the less certainty we have that all will be well. God gives us promises to stabilize us at the core. His promise are aimed at the essentials.

Our psalm now shifts to a second stanza. In the middle of this middle stanza, we hear of a scenario of grave danger for the Jews.

The Calming Flow of God's Blessing (vv. 4-7)

Enemies Roar (v. 6a)

[6a] The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered;

Remember, we're assuming that the historical setting of this Psalm is Assyria's threat to wipe Jerusalem off the map.⁶

⁶ Keil and Delitzsch give a different historical context. They suggest that the setting was the defeat of the Moabites, Ammonites and Edomites during the reign of King Jehoshaphat. Less likely, Briggs places this Psalm in the time of King

The “roaring” of Rabshekah’s threatening speech is ringing in our ears, and it was a serious threat. But Rabshekah wasn’t the only one who has ever roared against Israel.

- Pharaoh roared before the Red Sea swallowed him and his armies.
- The Amalekites roared against Moses in the wilderness and then were routed as Moses’ friends held his arms high in victory.
- Goliath roared against David, but David, strengthened by the Lord, roared louder.

I believe that the sons of Korah inserted this line (“*the nations made an uproar*”) into the Psalm because they wanted the Jews to think of these times - and others - when they were threatened.

But you’ll notice that this line doesn’t dominate the second stanza. It’s an outlier surrounded by other completely encouraging, uplifting, soothing lines, that, ironically, direct us to think about water.

Up to this point, the only H₂O imagery has been of destruction. Now, though, we hear of a river that brings peace and joy to God’s people.

A River that Brings Joy (vv. 4-7)

**[4] *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
The holy dwelling places of the Most High.***

**[5] *God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.***⁷

**[6] *The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered;
He raised His voice, the earth melted.***

**[7] *The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold.***

Josiah amid the international commotion occasioned by the Scythian invasion, while Wellhausen connects it with the revolution in the near East caused by the mastery of Alexander the Great. However, Alexander and Perowne (and others) are of the opinion that Rabshekah’s speech heralding Sennacherib’s invasion followed by Isaiah’s prophecy is the most likely occasion for the writing of Psalm 46. This is my view.

⁷ The imagery of verse 5 becomes very striking if we suppose a specific reference to the night in which Sennacherib’s host was smitten, and the sight which was disclosed at the break of day (see 2 Kings 19, the end of the chapter).

The many faces of rivers

Waters - and rivers, in particular - surface from Genesis to Revelation in the Bible as images for many things.

Often, gently flowing rivers are seen as great sources of refreshment to weary bodies.

When they are dry, they disappoint, deny and deprive. When they flood, they wreak havoc. When they flow normally, they sustain life and they water crops.

Rivers as metaphors

And, as we have seen already, physical rivers and streams picture, figuratively, events in the non-physical world. We speak of a flood of emotion, of tears, of trials.

At the beginning of our Psalm, the river flowing outside of Jerusalem is the Assyrian Empire in its flood of violence.

Psalm 1 says that walking with God is like being a tree planted beside a flowing river. There is life there. Psalm 23 takes us beside the still waters that restore our souls. There is peace and serenity there.

Our Psalm makes reference to **[4]...a river whose streams make glad the city of God.**

The “river” of Jerusalem

The Gihon spring

“*The city of God*”, of course, is Jerusalem and this is a beautiful image.

But Jerusalem isn’t known for its water sources. Jerusalem is dry and dusty and no rivers flow through it. But, in Jerusalem, there *is* flowing water.

Scholars believe that the “*river*” the Psalm refers to here is the only major spring in the city, the Gihon spring. That spring has been gurgling at least since the time of King David. (1,000 BC)

The Gihon spring sometimes runs underground and sometimes above ground, but it always flows. It has constantly filled Jerusalem’s cisterns and pools.

In biblical times, it was never known to have run dry. And during times of siege (like when Assyria had the city surrounded!) these waters brought life to the residents of Jerusalem.

A picture of God’s presence in the city

So, as this Psalm was being sung in Jerusalem, outside the city walls there was an Assyrian “river” flowing, laying waste to everything in its path.

When the Jews looked out from the city walls, all they could see were the troops of Sennacherib under the leadership of Rabshakeh, roaring away, the river cresting.

Inside those walls, though, the Gihon spring was a never-failing source of sustenance that supplied exactly what Jerusalem needed. It sometimes went subterranean, but it was always there. It kept going and it kept the Jews going. It refreshed. It never let the city down.

It was a physical image of the supernatural peace, presence, provision, and protection of God.

And, again, at this point in the Psalm we see the word, “*Selah*.” We hear the song writers’ invitation, “*Stop and let these words sink in.*”

Selah...

I am a lifelong Texan and I have a “thing” for rivers. I’ve spent a lot of time looking at dry riverbeds, so I get excited when I come across a flowing stream.

On our recent trip to New Mexico, I smiled while Kathy and I drove over the flowing waters of the Pecos River. It’s been known to run dry as it winds its way through the hot Texas desert. I’m happy to report that the Pecos is wet.

In recent years, I’ve surprised myself with how much I enjoy backpacking in the West Texas desert of Big Bend Ranch State Park.⁸

There’s nothing like hiking for a few miles on bone-dry trails and to then see a thick grove of cottonwood trees. They indicate water. And in the desert, water is life.

Once, Jesus spoke to a woman who lived in an arid village in Samaria. He wanted to offer her God’s salvation and God’s presence.

To get His message across to this woman who had come to a well to fill her bucket, He couched His offer in terms of water. He promised her “*living water*”, knowing that in her hot, dry world, water was life.⁹

She thought He was offering her H₂O. She was wrong. He was offering her - as He offers us - the river of God’s presence that satisfies now and forever.

Another time, when Jesus was in Jerusalem at a great festival, He stood up in the middle of a crowd and cried out, **[John 7:37] “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. [38] He who believes in Me, as the Scripture says, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’”**

Water is life.

When we walk with Jesus, we get access to a flowing river that refreshes and renews and strengthens. It “*makes glad*” our hearts, even when we’re in the middle of a desert.

⁸ The state park is about 100 miles to the west of the Big Bend National Park, is less mountainous, much drier - but with enough springs to supply a hiker with plenty of water.

⁹ See the story in John’s Gospel, chapter 4.

- We have all seen videos of the members of a church in Charleston, South Carolina, who, in 2015, forgave the young man who shot and killed nine of their friends at a Bible study. Those Christians had drunk deep from the river of God's grace.
- I have watched a grieving widow during the funeral of her husband break into a song of worship. She had drunk of the water Jesus offered her in her pain.
- Parents of children who have passed too soon have found the hope to move forward after their devastating loss in the rivers of Jesus' living water.
- Men and women facing marriage and family challenges have found the strength to go on at Jesus' river.
- We've watched teens take courageous "next steps" with Jesus after drinking the "*living water*" Jesus offers.
- And, if I may mix my metaphors, I've watched lots of people during terrible storms go to the river and re-discover the presence of God.

The river's water is there for you. Drink deep of it. Wade in it. Dive into it. Immerse yourself in that river as you draw near to God and express your dependence on Him in prayer.

Our psalm concludes with a final stanza that introduces us to two exercises that are vital if we want to be spiritually fit.

The first is the exercise of meditation.

Two Exercises for a Fit Soul (vv. 8-11)

Consider the Works of God (vv. 8-9)

***[8] Come, behold the works of the LORD,
Who has wrought desolations in the earth.***

***[9] He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;
He burns the chariots with fire.***

The Jews were facing a military challenge from the most powerful nation on earth at the time.

So, picking up on that theme, the song the sons of Korah have written invites the people to "*behold*") God's many mighty military deliverances through the centuries.

It's an invitation to think about them, muse on them, reflect on them. In short, meditate.

They would have thought about the defeat of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, the defeat of Og the king of Bashan and of Sihon the king of Heshbon, the defeat of the Midianites with Gideon's ridiculously small army, and the numerous defeats of Canaanites under David and Solomon.

To better trust the Lord for victory against the Assyrian threat in the present, they were to remember His victories in the past.

This is great counsel from the sons of Korah.

If you are in the middle of a storm now, remember stories from the Bible where God showed Himself faithful to people in their storms.

You'll want to think of how Jesus rescued His disciples from storms on the Sea of Galilee and how God delivered Paul from a shipwreck on the Mediterranean. Bring to mind all the stories of God's faithful care for His people you can think of.

Then, learn to see the fingerprints of God's work in your own life. You're His child. He's been there for you. Can you see it? Can you see how He protected you at one point, comforted you at another, provided for you in your hour of need?

Ask the Spirit to open your eyes to see how God has been there for you.

If you can see how He delivered you yesterday, you'll have a better chance at trusting Him to deliver you today.

The final couple of verses of this psalm are well known for their beauty and simplicity - and they are simply beautiful.

Relax - God IS (vv. 10-11)

**[10] “Cease striving¹⁰ and know that I am God;¹¹
I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”
[11] The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold.¹²**

For the first time in this Psalm, the sons of Korah are not speaking to their Jewish audience. They quote God.

God commands that we cease our frantic worry about our own welfare and find our rest in Him. He’s got everything under control. He’s king of the universe - and one day all creation will know that.

In fact, very shortly after this Psalm was written the Assyrians learned that Yahweh was God.

Isaiah’s prophecy was perfectly fulfilled.

The Assyrian army had gathered to kill everyone inside Jerusalem’s gates. Instead, with King Sennacherib present, an angel of the Lord put the entire Assyrian army to death.

Then, the king returned home to Nineveh to resume his reign and was killed by two of his supposedly trustworthy servants while he was worshiping the Assyrian god, Nisroch. (2 Kings 9:35-37)

So, *selah*.

After all we have seen, the sons of Korah end by urging us to “*stop and let the message of this song sink in.*”

Selah...

In His Word, God has given us some amazing promises of protection and provision. Will you take to heart these promises and rest in them?

There was a constantly flowing spring in Jerusalem that nourished the city even in desperate times. Will you express your need for what only God can provide and run to the river of the Holy Spirit’s peace and comfort and strength?

Will you take a few minutes this week to remember God’s works as seen in your Bible and in your life? And will you remember the first law of the universe and live by it, namely, “*There is a God, and it is not me.*”?

Will you say, “*In that God I will trust.*”?

¹⁰ King James, ESV and NIV have “*be still.*” Eugene Peterson’s The Message renders this phrase, “*Step out of the traffic.*”

¹¹ Bible scholars are divided as to whether God is speaking here to His people, or to the nations. Alexander (also Keil and Delitzsch) says that these words are addressed to the foes of God and His people and that the sense is, “*Cease from your attacks on My people; learn from what you have already seen that their Protector is strong. He will be acknowledged not only by His chosen people, but by all the nations and throughout the earth.*” Others believe that the Lord is urging His people to relax in the face of danger and trials by trusting in Him. This, to me, seems more in keeping with the general tenor of the Psalm.

¹² Notice that this is a repeat of v. 7b.