

August 9, 2009

A small boy, only three years of age, wakes up early one morning and slips unheard out of the tent he and his parents are sharing. He has one thing on his mind; his motorized truck. Not just any truck but one he can ride in, one he can steer, control, direct. And so he jumps in the little driver's seat and rolls away – only open road ahead of him, he is master of his own destiny. Well he is at least overjoyed with the great time he is having in the moment, driving down the camp trail in his very own truck, what fun! There really is nothing like an early morning drive – I quite enjoy my trip here on Sunday mornings! On down the trail he drives, following the path toward the river. Ah the river; the deep, wide and fast flowing river. For so many of us it represents something good. A river like this one provides great fishing, fun boating, maybe a nice cool place to take a dip in the summer heat. It is ideal to camp near such a river; deep, wide and fast flowing. This small boy driving his very own truck comes to where the trail breaks through the trees and he sees the boat launch ahead – a nice little patch of paved road for his truck; just the right place for a truck really. On he drives, down the gently sloping pavement – right into the river itself. Right into that pleasant stream of deep, wide, fast flowing water. Do you know how this story ends?

Thankfully this little boy is spotted by one person who sees him going into the river and another who is fishing on the river. Thankfully this little boy's truck is buoyant, floating on the river rather than sinking, even if it does so upside down. Thankfully this little boy manages to struggle onto the underside of the mini-vehicle as it floats further and further down stream. Thankfully he is saved and does not drown.

August 9, 2009

In his commentary on Psalm 46, John Calvin points out that Isaiah (8:6) reproved people for despising “the gently flowing waters of Shiloah, and long(ing) for deep and rapid rivers”. I think that we do the same thing here in North America – we despise the gentle waters, and long for the deep and rapid rivers. This metaphor is played out in our relentless search for more excitement, wealth, status, fun.

In the face of trouble so many of us frantically search out diversion, quick answers, relief, even if it is temporary. In the end we find ourselves amid the waters that roar and foam rather than gently flowing, life-giving water.

In Psalm 46 the image of water is once again very important: it represents the forces of danger, evil and chaos against the free-flowing, refreshing, stream of God’s water, the water that makes glad the city. What images of water do you carry with you? We really are fascinated and touched by stories about oceans – think the sinking of the Titanic – floods – think Hurricane Katrina – lack of water, draught – think the dirty thirties, African famines. While we are fully aware of our need for water we mainly take it for granted here in North America, where it is so plentiful we can use it for all sorts of other pleasures like swimming pools, watering our lawn and washing our cars.

Those of you who have or do farm know how important water is to your livelihood – too much, too little, or just enough at the right time can make or break a season. In Psalm 46 water takes on a dynamic part in highlighting the nature of God.

August 9, 2009

God is our refuge and strength – God is the one who protects us and gives us rest from outside forces and strengthens us from the inside – God is the one who turns our truck over in the river, giving us a buoy to cling to in the midst of deep, wide, fast flowing life – God’s provision as described in Psalm 46 has both a practical/physical connotation as well as a spiritual, emotional feel to it. A very present or well proven help in trouble – the psalmist is pointing out reality, there is no question in the mind of this writer – there is no doubt, but only truth that has been proven in the most tangible ways – what tangible ways has God proven his very present help to each of us? When has our drive into the river ended in a thankfully surprising float down a river?

In dynamic opposition to the waters of danger and chaos that shake mountains and cause foaming tumult we have God as our refuge and strength, we have God whose river is gentle and sweet, making glad the city of God. Ah the city ... what is your gut reaction to the concept of city? For some the city represents a large, over-crowded, dangerous place with noisy traffic, high crime rates, expensive living and unfriendly inhabitants. But have any of you got pleasant memories of quaint cities you’ve visited when on vacation – think of the romance of Paris, the history of London, the charm of Venice. When I lived in rural Manitoba the city represented opportunity, excitement, sophistication and superiority. A city can be a gathering place for artists, musicians and performers. Arts and culture, higher learning in universities, professional sporting events and foreign dignitaries are found in cities. The city for the ancient Hebrew people was a wonder – not only was Jerusalem the Holy city, the house of God, but it

August 9, 2009

represented protection from marauding enemies, a place from which a benevolent king rules, the place that is caught up in the identity, politics and religious experience of a whole people, of an entire nation. The high walls were strong containing rooms for storing food and drink. The gate into the city was well guarded and reinforced. Necessarily built on the hill, or up the side of a hill, the ancient Hebrew city would never be placed in the low valley were it was more vulnerable – never mind that the valley floor was fertile and easier to farm. The city of Jerusalem contained the temple which in turn housed the Ark of the Covenant – God’s tangible dwelling place, the very present reminder that He was with His children, a very present reminder of His promise to the Israelites that He would be their God and they would be His people.

The tough thing about cities in ancient times was the lack of good plumbing! If a city found itself under siege the flow of water into the city became a point of dire weakness. Great lengths were taken to build a city so that water could flow into it in a secret place or in a way that could not be easily interrupted by the enemy. After all, holing up in a city to wait out an enemy attack did no good if you were cut off from your water supply – and so God’s holy city was praised for its streams that make it glad. Water flowing in the city was just another piece of evidence of God’s very present help.

Some commentators think that God’s help for the city when the morning dawns is a statement of God’s continued and renewed presence each day, while others speak of the early hours before the sun begins to rise as the

August 9, 2009

most dangerous time, when the city is most vulnerable to attack. Kathleen Norris is a writer who has studied the early Christian monks and she talks about “praying at the hinges of time” – morning, noon and night as the times of the day when “we might be most open to God” and also most open to feeling despair. So here we have these second meanings again: the dawning of the morning when we are vulnerable to attack from outside our fortified walls and from within our own souls. As CS Lewis points out in his discussion on Christian readings of Old Testament scripture, second meanings may not be those intended by the original writer but they often exist, rooted in the first truth and expanded by the reader’s new knowledge. We cannot but help reading these psalms of assurance in a metaphorical way. Certainly the ancient Hebrew who has experienced the destruction of the temple must have also read spiritual experience into the concrete illustrations of God literally protecting the city of Jerusalem from attack – but for a Christian reader we have even more to layer into our metaphor – we have the experience of Christ. This does not make us any more God’s children than the ancient psalmist was or is. Rather it is experienced by us as a deeper, wider and faster flowing revelation of God’s nature through His Son.

I was reading from a commentary written in the 1960’s. That’s more than 40 years old and approaches to biblical scholarship have changed somewhat since then.

But I was reading it for a reason – there are points of view that crop up that are of great interest and even direct relevance to today’s life. Commenting

August 9, 2009

on Psalm 46, the commentator offers the following description of modern life:

“the tensions produced by modern life are increasing, and each of us has his breaking point. This means that unless we learn to ease our tensions, they will break us. There is no possible evasion of that fact. There fore the devices for coping with tension, from aspirin to alcohol, from hobby to holiday, are advocated and advertised endlessly. Still the figures that tell the story of broken minds show their appalling increase.”¹

Do you think this fellow was aware in early 1960 how much more his words would ring true today, some 49 years later? Better yet do you think that the ancient psalmist would ever imagine that we here in Calvin Presbyterian Church, in Abbotsford, British Columbia would be laying claim to his words: The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge?

As we watch nations in uproar and as we recount the tottering of so many kingdoms over history is it still true that when God utters His voice, the earth melts? Here is were we join the psalmist in looking from small ancient battles won where customarily the armaments of the enemy were burned in a heap, to a time of greater peace, a time of deep, wide and fast flowing peace, peace that seeps into the cracks of every wall, peace that overflows in our hearts, peace that makes glad all cities, all souls – to the end-time promise of our Saviour that when Christ comes again He will reign over a peace that humanity has not known since leaving the Garden of Eden.

¹ The Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol 4, Psalm 46, 244.

August 9, 2009

“Be still and know that I am God!” – as we wait to see fulfillment of the truth that our Lord will be “exalted among the nations, ... exalted in the earth” – we are to be still, to wait, to hope – Norris reminds us that these are not passive things we are asked to do, they may seem mundane but they are deeply participatory

– just notice how much work it takes for you to be still – just notice how waiting requires watching and being ready to react to whatever it is you are waiting for – just notice how hope needs refreshment, reminder and nurture to stay alive. Be still and know that I am God – wait, hope and be. Look to that deep, wide and fast flowing stream that is the life-giving grace of God that makes glad the cities of our souls and be still and know.