A Poem for Perilous Times
Psalm 46
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We live in perilous times.

You say: "Hey Preach. I got up this morning. Did my hair and dressed nicely, got here on time, I'm sitting on these wooden benches just to have you tell me something I already know!? Really?!"

Maybe. However, I'll say it again: "We live in perilous times."

Trump. Economic uncertainty. Trade wars. Real wars. Genocide in Gaza. War in Ukraine. Missiles and bombs in Iran. Threat of earthquakes and tsunamis. Retirement funds in peril. Possibility of another pandemic. And, of course, there are all things in our personal lives that have the possibility of making us anxious.

We live in perilous times.

What are we to do about it. There is nothing, it would seem, that little old me here in Swift Current can do about Trump and Putin and Netinyahu and Ali Kholmenei and all the other men with power who threaten our world. And I sure can't stop earthquakes and tornadoes and tsunamis. Nor am I a scientist that can wipe out all viruses that threaten. Is there any hope?

Let's find out, shall we? Surely this is not the first time in history that people have lived in perilous times. How about if we go back in time and discover how they found hope. There may be something there for us.

It is this search for what might give hope that brought me to Ps 46, the poem Fran read for us earlier. I confess that me and contemporary poetry do not get along very well. However, and this became especially real for me in 2015 during my cancer & chemo journey, things change when I go back to the Ancient Poetry. There is something about that stuff that grabs my imagination.

At the same time, I recognize, we run into a problem when we go to these Ancient lyrics. The problem is the very fact that they are ancient and to a large extent we know little about context and historical background and just as little about metaphor and images and stories that the poets and song writers used as they wrote for their people. Because of that, other than with Psalm 23, we have a tendency to pick a line here and a verse there. Like in Ps 46. Many of us are probably familiar with vs. 10: Be still and know that I am God." The rest, well, it's okay. We don't realize the power it punches and how much it adds to the profound words: "Be still and know that I am God."

So let's try fixing that today for this one poem, a poem I have called "A Poem for Perilous Times," a poem that references two stories, paints two pictures, and uses two names for God.

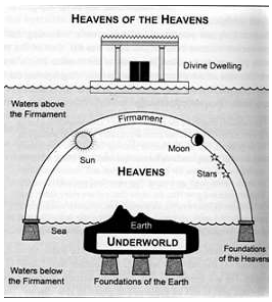
There is one caution when we approach poetry this way. Poems are meant to grab as they speak as one piece, not ripped into little pieces and scattered about. At the same time, to allow the whole to speak to us with all the profoundness it has to offer, evoke for us all the images and pictures it contains, and grab our imaginations so that it impacts us mentally and emotionally today, we have to do a bit of taking apart. A bit of pointing to and talking about individual pieces before we come back to hearing and experiencing the whole thing as one poem with an important and powerful message for us today.

Scholars have suggested that Ps 46 was probably written around 700 BC during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. A huge Assyrian army with the best weaponry of the day surrounded the city. They cut off all food supplies. The people and the king with his family and advisors were in dire straits. It was truly a "perilous time." The very survival of the people and the continued existence of the kingdom were in real doubt. An existential threat if there ever was one!

In that context, the poet shouts out: "God is our refuge and strength." There it is, in the opening line. Something the crowd would have noticed as the Folk Singer strummed his guitar (or harp) and sang. Something they would have noticed and we mostly don't. What they would have noticed is the word and name for God—Elohim. "Elohim is our refuge and strength." In the collection of Ancient Writings, we call the Old Testament that uses various names for God, this would have jumped out because it is the first name used for God in the first book, first chapter, first verse. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth." In the Hebrew "God" is the third word and the word is "Elohim." So, "In the beginning when Elohim created the heavens and the earth." That's the first thing to note. The name used for God by the poet in this song is the one he and the people used to identify God, the Creator.

The second thing, not in the poem but important to understanding the poem and catching its power is what things were like when Elohim began creating. Shaped in our thinking by Greek philosophy, the same philosophy that shaped some of the key writers of the New Testament, we are used to thinking that creation was "out of nothing." They describe it as "*what we now see did not come from anything that can be seen."* [1] The Ancient Hebrews did not think that way. As a result, vs. 2 describes what it is Elohim had to work with when he began to create—A Sinister, Frightfully Dark, Chaotic, Bottomless Deep. Utter Chaos for sure. The phrase used is *tohu wa bohu*. The very sound of it sounds sinister. *Tohu wa bohu*. It is used only two more times in the OT and in both cases it is used to describer the utter death and devastation of war.[2]

Faced with this Sinister, Frightfully Dark, Chaotic, Bottomless Deep. Utter Chaos. *Tohu wa bohu* Elohim was in no way cowed. He spoke and Light, Glorious Light replaced the Darkness. He took the waters and put half of them at the bottom to become springs, streams, rivers, lakes, and ocean. He took the other half and locked them away behind the heavens, the dome of the sky. Then Elohim created everything else. Had you been able to step off the edge of the Earth—after all everyone knew it was flat—turned around and looked, this is what you would have seen.



There is all kinds of fascinating stuff in this diagram and that stuff has all kinds of fascinating implications for how we read our Bibles. For today, we have to restrict our selves to one detail. Notice underneath the earth there are pillars holding up the earth. They are the foundations of the earth. If they crack and tumble, the earth sinks into the sea. All life drowns and the Earth and Life on it are no more.

These pillars are what the poet references as mountains in the heart of the sea. Even if those shake, even if they threaten to crack and tumble, "we will not fear." Why won't we fear? Because Elohim who created them is our refuge and strength.

A modern-day equivalent? Remember Boxing Day, 2004 and the earthquake in the Indian Ocean that measured 9+ on the Richter scale? It's shaking was felt all the way to Alaska. And remember the tsunami that followed, killing 227,000 people? Even if caught in the middle of that, we will not fear! Why not? Because Elohim, the Creator, is our refuge and strength. And even if the entire planet shakes and threatens to crumble or explode and 30-meter tsunamis hit every coastline, we will not fear. Why not? Because Elohim, the Creator of all that Is, is our refuge and strength.

After all that, the poet isn't done. Nature and creation don't somehow grab your imagination? The danger at the city gates is not earthquake and tsunamis and you're not great at analogies and metaphors? Well, then try this.

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[1] Heb 11:3. NRSV.

[2] Jer 4:23–26. "I looked on the earth, and it was complete chaos." It was *tohu wa bohu*. Eugene Peterson captures this in *The Messager* when he translates the text: "I looked at the earth—it was back to pre-Genesis chaos and emptiness." The other OT text is someplace in Isaiah.

"The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter." The people knew about that. Sennacherib and his Assyrian army had surrounded the city. Twenty years earlier the Assyrian king and his army had wiped out Judah's sister nation—Israel—just to the north. In the intervening years the powerful Assyrians—a world superpower in its day—had conquered other nations. Kingdoms had tottered. Nations were in an uproar. Is there refuge and strength in this kind of world, Mr. Folk Singer? "Yes, there is!" the Folk Singer sings. Changing the name for God, he continues: "The Lord of hosts is with us."

That's how we read it in English. The Ancients would have heard him sing: "Yahweh of hosts is with us." The hosts are the angel armies. Wherever your English OT has LORD in capital letters, the Hebrew has Yahweh.

How did this name make a difference? We have to go back to another story. This time it is the Exodus. Everyone in Jerusalem knew the story of how their ancestors had been slaves in Egypt under another world power of the 13th to 14th century BCE. Hopelessly in bondage, With no hope. And then Moses showed up and promised deliverance, by the hand of God. "Yeah right" the people muttered. "Who is this god who will free us?" With confidence in his voice that hid the fear in his heart, Moses said: "God told me to tell you his name, a name never before known and not know to anyone else but you. Kneeling by a burning bush out of which God spoke, God said: 'I am Yahweh.' Tell the people Yahweh will free you."

And Yahweh did. The army of a world superpower was no match for Yahweh of hosts. The most powerful army in the mid-Eastern world at that time was destroyed in the Red Sea. Ultimately it was Yahweh who set them up as a nation in the Promised Land.

When the Folk Singer sang "Yahweh of hosts is with us; the *elohe* of Jacob, our Ancestor—the God who has been from the Beginning and overthrew the Egyptians is with us and is our refuge," the people would have remembered their salvation from Egyptian slavery, their deliverance from bondage, their founding story.

Yahweh of hosts is also with us and Creator God is our refuge. In the face of Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump and Ali Kjamenei, President Xi and Kim Jung Un and all the other authoritarian, would-be dictators wreaking havoc in our world with trade wars and war wars, Yahweh of hosts is with us, the God of history our refuge.

"Be still & know that I am God"

Remembering Elohim, the Creator, the Redeemer from the Sinister, Frightfully Dark, Chaotic, Bottomless Deep. Utter Chaos. The *tohu wa bohu*, and recalling the wonderful story of the Exodus and delivery by Yahweh, the people were now ready for the poem's punch line: "Be still and know that I am God, Elohim, the One from the Beginning also known as Yahweh who saves from oppression." Yahweh—I Amm who I Am. God IS.

The people knew that God's presence did not necessarily mean the kind of salvation experienced in the Exodus story. We know the same. God is not a fairy godmother, at our beck and call to perform whatever magic we need done. Nor is God predictable. The specifics of miraculous delivery in one situation are not the same as the "not-deliverance" in another. We have no way of predicting nor explaining. However, what this song assures us of, whatever the situation and its outcome, God IS and God is our refuge and strength, an always present help in time of trouble. Therefore, we can quietly rest in the strong, comforting arms of God.

I think most, maybe all of you know that in 2015 I traveled the cancer and chemo journey. As I wrote in my book, *Wandering the Wilderness*, during that journey I came to believe less ***about*** God and believed ever more ***in*** God. I became profoundly convinced that God was and is always Present, always Loving, always Caring, no matter how dark and hellish the chemo journey. Sometime later, I was having coffee with a few friends and we were discussing this. I confessed that though I was convinced of God: Present, Loving Caring while receiving chemo and doing poorly, there was no indication I was facing death, though in my depression I began to wonder. Then I added: "But I have no idea how I would react in the face of a terminal cancer diagnosis." One of my friends who also dealt with colon cancer and chemo said: "God: Present, Loving, Caring." And I thought, "Right. God:

Present, Loving, Caring. I don't have to feel now like I am ready to face death, that I could do so with equanimity. However, I can be convinced that God will be there, Present, Loving, Caring, when I do face death as I inevitably will. Then, at that point, because of God: Present, Loving, Caring, I will be able to say: "Be at peace for God is God."

God: Present, Loving, Caring