

**Stand By Me**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**11-20-2016**  
**Psalm 46**

*If the sky that we look upon  
Should tumble and fall  
And the mountain should crumble to the sea  
I won't cry, I won't cry  
No I won't shed a tear  
Just as long as you stand, stand by me.*

Ben E King was an R&B singer. But he could have been a Psalmist! Or maybe today's Psalmist could have been an R&B singer!!! Today's lection (with a slight redaction by your pastor) begins:

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.  
God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear.

Friends, whether we live in 1961, or in sixth century Palestine, or even in Charlotte in 2016, God is present. In the first stanza of today's lection, the Psalmist tells us that when we stand in God's presence, we need not be afraid, not of earthquakes, not of tempests, not of anything.

And the Psalmist tells us that God is more than just an emergency storm shelter. God is also a refuge in the midst of human storms: wars, tyranny, oppression, civil upheaval – God's seen it all. But God has broad shoulders. And even in chaos, God offers us refuge.

So let's review. The Psalmist tells us that God is big, so big, that in God's presence, we need not fear the most imminent dangers, both natural and manmade.

And I think this is a good place in the text for us to pause, because while this Psalm was written 3,000 years ago, it sure feels like it could have been written thirty minutes ago. As we sit here, wildfires rage in Western North Carolina; families in the eastern part of the state still recover from Hurricane Matthew; our current governor alleges voter fraud in a race separated by less than 5,000 votes; a quarter of Charlotte's school children go hungry, and those designated in the bottom quartile of income are the least likely in the nation to escape the cycle of poverty.

And when we live in chaotic times like ours, it's easy to hear a text like today's and ask: Where exactly is God's refuge? Does this psalm depict an ideal God or an actual God? Sure, there's beauty in these words, but is there truth?

Perhaps the second stanza will offer more clarity for those who feel conflicted. The Psalmist tells us of a river whose streams make glad the city of God. God is in the midst of this city, and it shall not be moved.

The city the Psalmist speaks of is Jerusalem. But the use of the word river is interesting. There isn't a river in Jerusalem. There's Hezekiah's tunnel, but if it's a river, we're gonna have to start calling creeks by another name.

Obviously, the river is a metaphor. Some would say the river is God. And I wouldn't argue, but I'd be a bit more specific. I believe that the river is a collection of people filled with God's spirit. Remember last week? We talked about God's audacious undertaking: the creation of new heavens and a new earth. And we mentioned that such a creation is NOT God waving a magic wand to produce some Utopia in the next life. Nor can such a creation instantly erase the pain of the past. God's statement of a new creation is an invitation for all people to join God in the present.

I think the river whose steams make glad the city of God, is not a collection of water droplets running in the same direction, but rather, it is a collection of people living consistently and intentionally in covenant with God. Right here and right now.

Tillie is fond of mentioning the Colorado River. That little trickle wasn't much, but it sure was persistent! For millions and millions of years those little droplets of water pushed forward. They made it all the way to the Pacific Ocean, and managed to carve out the Grand Canyon in the process.

This morning, we acknowledge Christ the King Sunday – a tradition that began in the early twentieth century as a response to the rise of Fascism in Europe. Church leaders reminded their parishioners that our first allegiance is not to the powers of this world, but rather to the reign of the risen Christ. In other words, Christ the King Sunday is a reminder that we too, are part of a persistent river. It was a little stream that began at Pentecost. But over two millennia, that river has grown drop by drop, flowing steady and constant, focused on carving out the canyon of God's future.

To believe the Psalmist's claim, is to remember the saints who navigated the current of that good river. And to make true the Psalmist's claim in our own lives is to follow those good saints by grabbing our own oars, and continuing their work. Sure, there will be storms, but there will also be a refuge.

But that Psalmist is an intuitive writer. He or she senses that there are still skeptics. The third stanza continues with the basics – a rundown of God's accolades. But the storms of adversity are hard. We know the God of Jacob. We've heard about a Red Sea parted and felled walls around Jericho and fiery furnaces unable to consume three righteous young men. And still we doubt God's strength and God's promise. And so the Psalmist shakes us back into attention one last time: "Be still and know that I am God."

Susan Olson likens this verse to a parent shushing a child – it is a call to attention. And I think she's right. The Psalmist is trying to tell us of the God who is with us past, present, and future. Rather than be inspired by the truth of this portfolio, too often we let our anxiety about the future distract us. In hearing this verse, I am instantly reminded of Shell Silverstein's famous poem:

*Listen to the MUSTN'TS, child,  
Listen to the DON'TS  
Listen to the SHOULDN'TS  
THE IMPOSSIBLES, the WON'TS  
Listen to the NEVER HAVES  
Then listen close to me –*

*Anything can happen, child  
Anything can be*

The Psalmist tells us we belong to the God of Jacob. Jacob's God is with us, and Jacob's God is our strength and refuge. And because we belong to Jacob's God, anything can happen child, anything can be!!!

Here's the challenge for us today. Ben E. King's beautiful song is a conditional statement, whether it's offered from one sweetheart to another, or from a parent to a child, or even from a congregation to God. I will not be afraid, I will not cry, I will not lose faith, just as long as you stand by me.

But what if we sang this song with the confidence and assurance of the Psalmist? What if we sang this song with the confidence and assurance of the three young men and the thousands of European clerics who dared to tell the likes of Nebuchadnezzar and Mousseline, "We serve a power much greater than you?" And what if we sang this song with the confidence and assurance of the Christ we follow?

*When the night has come  
And the land is dark  
And the moon is the only light we'll see  
No I won't be afraid  
Oh, I won't be afraid  
Because you stand, stand by me*

*If the sky that we look upon  
Should tumble and fall  
Or the mountain should crumble to the sea  
I won't cry, I won't cry  
No, I won't shed a tear  
Because you stand, stand by me*

And what if, bolstered by such confidence, we the people of Sardis Baptist Church proclaimed to all who are hungry, to all who are sick, to all who are poor, to all who feel left out, to all who feel anxious, to all who grieve, to all who feel weary, to all who doubt, to all who cannot believe that somewhere, someplace is a river whose streams make glad the city of God... what if we had the confidence to proclaim:

*Whenever you're in trouble won't you stand by me, stand by me, stand by me.*

Friends, God is our refuge and our strength, and a very present help in times of trouble. Therefore, we shall not fear. This day or any day.

Amen.