

Our Stronghold  
Psalm 46

Let's see. The biggest earthquake to hit Mexico in a century struck on Friday. It killed over 50 people, striking Oaxaca and Chiapas, the two poorest states in Mexico. This also happens to be the part of the country where the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico, a partner denomination of the EPC is particularly strong. The quake was so massive that it caused buildings to sway in Mexico City – 650 miles away. The earth being removed and the mountains shaking – check.

Meanwhile, the same southern part of Mexico that experienced the earthquake was also being hit by Hurricane Katia. And then there's Hurricane Irma, plowing into Key West, Naples and Tampa this morning. Thousands in shelters and millions without power – even my hometown of Valdosta all the way in South Georgia is setting up shelters and expecting hurricane-force winds.

And don't forget Hurricane Harvey which drenched southeast Texas last week, killing around 70 people, and damaging or destroying over 100,000 homes. The total cost to repair everything will be somewhere around \$30 billion. Mountains being carried into the midst of the sea. Waters roaring and troubled – check.

And let's not forget what's going on overseas. North Korea is shooting missiles into the Sea of Japan and exploding a Hydrogen bomb. ISIS is still causing trouble in Syria, and we're not sure which side Russia is on over there. And here at home, Congress in gridlock, seemingly unable to agree about anything. People rioting in the streets over statues a century old, commemorating a war that happened even longer ago.

And things aren't much better closer to home, are they? In our state's capital the number of violent crimes in its streets seems to be second only to the number of potholes. Our county government pays out 70% of its considerable income in salaries and can't figure out how to keep our hospital open. The nations raging, the kingdoms moving - check.

Of course, we've been through other personal storms lately. What happens when your relationships splinter? What happens when your health suddenly fails? How do you go on when your loved ones have gone to be with the Lord, sometimes without any warning?

Is there a stronghold of safety anywhere? Is there any security in this world? Is there a place of refuge? Not in the earth that quakes. Not in the seas that roar and foam. Not in the rivers that flood and change their course.

Oh, and not in the kingdoms that totter, either. For no matter how much we look to our state and federal government to organize relief efforts and to provide funds to victims, with two

major storms striking several major metropolitan areas back-to-back, one wonders if FEMA will have sufficient funds to help everyone. And even volunteers have their limits – how in the world will the Cajun Navy make it all the way to Tampa?

Where is our stronghold? Where is our place of safety, our refuge? Not in anything that the forces of nature or government can destroy – not in our homes or our jobs, not in our bank accounts or trust funds, not in our social security checks or Medicare payments or pension plans. It's not even in our friends or family members, as reliable and generous as they all are. No, if we look to anything in this world for refuge or reassurance, if we place our trust in them, sooner or later, we will be bitterly disappointed.

Now, at this point we might be tempted to give in to a rather understandable state of worry and anxiety. But somehow, in the face of similar problems the psalmist says, "We will not fear." For instead of trusting in our government or our friends or our stuff, he would have us build our lives on a firmer foundation – on God Himself.

And this just makes sense when we think about how much more powerful our God is, even when compared to the worst of our problems, even when compared to the mightiest forces of nature.

Now, I've never been through an earthquake, but a reporter who was in southern Mexico this week said it felt like a train running underneath the ground where he was standing. But even though it was a magnitude 8 quake, it was over in just seconds.

In contrast, think about the power of our God. Verse 6 says that when He utters His voice, the earth doesn't just quake – it melts. The same divine voice through which everything that is or ever has been came into existence has the power to undo all that creative power just as completely, just as suddenly.

Of course, lately we've seen that some natural disasters are slow to unfold. We have tracked Hurricane Irma for the better part of a week, noticing every shift in its predicted path, wondering if it would come into the Gulf as Hurricane Katrina did. Even more strangely, the rivers and reservoirs that were swollen with Hurricane Harvey's rains had their flood levels predicted well before they crested. Under sunny skies, our friends in Lake Jackson could only watch as the rivers flowing south from Houston swallowed their homes.

What can we do, helpless as we are in the face of such disasters? Well, verse 4 tells us about another kind of river, one that doesn't bring disaster but gladness. This river is not a bane but a blessing to the city of God.

And Jesus said the same sort of thing in our responsive reading today didn't He? As He was standing in the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High, He said, "If

any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink.” The river that Jesus supplies isn’t a destructive force, but a refreshing force that fills us and satisfies us – for that river is Jesus Christ Himself.

Today, the earth shakes and the storms rage and the rivers rise. But Jesus invites us to come to Him, to the Word of God Who spoke the world into existence, to the One Who walks on the waves and whose mere word stills the storms. No matter what we are going through, Jesus is the One with the power to save us,

And this power is available to us as well. For Jesus goes on to say that anyone who comes to Him, who believes on Him and trusts in Him will have rivers of living water flow out of our bellies, out of our hearts, out of the very center of our being. He doesn’t just come to quench our physical thirst – He comes to give us abundant life, overflowing life, no matter what is going on around us.

And David makes the same connection, doesn’t he? In verse 4, he says that a river brings gladness to the city, the people of God. And why? Because in verse 5 we learn that God is in the midst of us – that’s why we won’t be moved. That’s how God will help us so promptly – because in Jesus Christ, God isn’t just with us, in His Holy Spirit, He lives within us.

And that brings us to the second reason we should not fear, even in the face of the worst storms of life. For if we should find confidence in the unimaginable power of our God, we can also take comfort in the amazing fact of God’s presence. That’s how the psalm begins, doesn’t it? God is a very present help in our times of trouble. God is in the midst of His people, so we will not be moved. The living water of Christ is within us, no matter what the outward circumstances of our lives may be.

And I think we understand how important the nearness of God is. For why do we go to see friends in the hospital or nursing home? Why do we visit families in their bereavement? Why do we attend memorial services? It’s because we know that just being there is so important. It somehow lessens the pain and sorrow when a grief is shared. It helps so much just to know that someone else is there.

In the same way, in the midst of all our troubles, we can take comfort in the presence of God. We are not alone in our pain and grief. Our loving Father Who created us and Who has redeemed all His people by the blood of His own Son is always with us, and even within us.

So, yes, earthquakes may rock the mountains and hurricanes may uproot trees and plow through houses. Kings may threaten with their armies and governments may blunder and bluster. But verse 9 reminds us that it is God Who makes wars to cease to the end of the earth. It is God Who takes our worst weapons and breaks them, burning them to ashes. It is God Who commands the swaggering braggarts of the earth to be still, to cease their striving and know that

He is God, and that His anointed Messiah is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the One Who stills even the worst of storms with but a word.

Yes, there are many scary things in this world. There are many situations that are completely beyond our control. But there is nothing that is too difficult for our God. By the blood of His cross and the power of His resurrection, all authority in Heaven and on Earth belongs to our Lord Jesus. And when He comes again, His name will be exalted, not just in the Church, but throughout all the nations. All over the world, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

But until that day, while we live in a world of bereavement and bureaucrats, a world of earthquakes and tornadoes, a world of fires and floods, we already have a place of perfect refuge, a source of sufficient strength. For the Lord of Hosts, the commander of all the armies of Heaven is with us today, guiding us and protecting us and helping us and our loves ones in our time of need.

And so let us rejoice in His presence, and let us pray for His help. And to that end, let us bow down before Him, accepting His pardon and submitting to His perfect Will. For no matter what happens, the God of Jacob is our stronghold.