

The Calm in a Time of Concern
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Much has happened in the span of a week. The following is our situation. We have gone from last Sunday, March 15th two fatalities to the coronavirus in Louisiana to 20, and 103 people tested positive with coronavirus to now about 763. 60% of these infected are in Orleans Parish. The New Orleans economy looks grim. *The Times-Picayune The New Orleans Advocate* has reported, “Among the country’s 106 largest metro areas, tourism-dependent New Orleans has the third-highest percentage of jobs in sectors most at risk from the recession that is beginning to ripple across the U.S., according to a new study” (March 19, 2020; 7A). This week our Mayor LaToya Cantrell has issued a mandatory emergency order for the city that all residents and visitors “remain in their homes whenever possible and avoid any gatherings”. And finally, our own Louisiana Annual Conference Bishop Cythnia Fierro Harvey has sent out an email message this week saying, “. . . I am asking you to postpone all in-person gatherings of all sizes and that you explore new and creative alternatives to in-person worship. There will come a time when we can resume normal activity, but for now, this is the ‘new normal.’” I know that for many of us we feel like we are living out again elements of 9/11 of 2001, Hurricane Katrina of 2005, the Great Recession of 2008, and the Gulf Oil Spill of 2010. We can understand the lament of New Orleans restaurateur Frank Brigtsen who recently expressed in a TV interview, in effect, that we just want things to get back to the same old, predictable normal. This is our situation, beloved. But I remind us of these things to say to you, and to me, that while this may be our situation, it is not the full story for Christians. Just as during Lent we lament the real situation of the crucifixion of Jesus for our sins, we also know the full story is the very real truth in the resurrection of Jesus!

God's people are not a group of passive people who are defeated by life's circumstances. Rather, God's people are victors, because Jesus Christ is the ultimate Victor! This theme of very real hope in the midst of struggle is throughout the Bible, especially in one particular Psalm.

READ Psalm 46:1-11 (pp. 517-518)

READ vv 1-3. "God is our refuge and strength, though the earth, mountains, and waters violently change and shake— i.e., though all nature seems to forsake us!" I admit we don't see right now mountains shaking or waters roaring. We have what President Trump calls an "invisible enemy". And this enemy is formidable like mountains shaking and waters roaring. E.g., I have heard that this virus is more contagious than the flu, and it can exist two to three days on plastic and stainless steel surfaces, up to 24 hours on cardboard, and up to three hours in the air once it is airborne as through a cough or sneeze. The article said it is unclear if a person can pick up the virus from contaminated surfaces. (From Rosie McCull, "This Is How Long Coronavirus Can Survive on Plastic, Cardboard, and in the Air"; March 16, 2020; Newsweek website) The problem, I believe, is if we touch a contaminated surface and then put our hands on our nose, eyes, or mouth. Symptoms of the virus can occur anywhere from two to 14 days after exposure. Once a person is sick It can take up to six weeks to get well. Nevertheless, God is our refuge and strength at this time. OT scholar Derek Kidner (*Psalms 1-72*, p. 174) has suggested, rightly I believe, that this emphasizes God's outer protection— a refuge we find with Him— and God's inner protection of strength. How can God do this? Because he is a "very present help in trouble"— or literally, "One found to be a help in distress to the highest degree/in a powerful way". Interestingly, the word for "help" is found in the name Eliezer (literally, My God is a help) as found in Exodus 18:4, and is the word used for the woman God formed from Adam's rib in Genesis 2:18. And God is *very* present to

us in that way as a helper. The Hebrew says literally, “He [God] is found to be a support in distress to the highest degree.” It is always comforting to have someone near in a time of distress. E.g., I recall when I was young and going to bed one night in a dark room I imagined I had seen a burglar smuggle into my room, and I called my Dad to help, and he came in with a club of some sort and looked under the bed and in the closet, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, and give me confidence that no burglar! I went to sleep that night in the comfort of knowing my Dad was nearby. God is like that for us. Have you ever seen that? E.g., I am reminded a few weeks ago that a town was hard hit by a tornado, and there was a newsman being interviewed about his time of meeting the people of the town, and he said how impressed he was that a continual refrain from the people was their reliance on God at this time. It is interesting that the word for “help” in “very present help” is used of God in Exodus 18:4 where He is called Eliezer (literally, “my God is a helper”) and is used in Genesis 2:18 of what woman was to be for man— his helper.

READ vv 4-7. “When the nations rage and threaten with destruction, God is also like a fortress that is high and inaccessible. Cf. vv 7,11.” What the psalmist is saying is that God can provide for us a safety and protection— like a fortress way high up! Have you ever seen a fortress like that? E.g., in Scotland there is beautiful castle like this; it is called Dunnotar Castle, which is gorgeously built on what seems to be a high island of rock jetting out in the sea. It seems to be impregnable from enemies.

READ vv 8-11. “How is God able to be like this despite such alarming and threatening situation? Because He is a God who is very near (v 1), a God who is with us (vv 4-5,7,11), and because He is a God who is in charge! Cf. 9:9-10; Mark 4:38-40.” Particularly memorable is v 10, which is literally, “Stop and know that I Myself am God!” E.g., I have often shared this text with people before

surgery because of its great comfort, and I have used to think that its primary focus is the person feeling distress, but OT scholar Derek Kidner has convinced me otherwise. He states, “. . . *Be still*. . . , is not in the first place comfort for the harassed but a rebuke to a restless and turbulent world” (ibid., p. 176). Of course, it is comfort, great comfort, for the harassed, stressed out person— but more in a secondary way, as God initially addresses the turbulent world. This is reminiscent of Jesus in Mark 4:38-40; READ. Jesus stills the storm first, and then His disciples, as He still does today. Are we going to panic and get despondent with the coronavirus as though the joy is taken out of our lives, or do we have the faith to trust Him? E.g., I recall when I was 16 and made a commitment to Christ that stuck that my favorite Bible text was from Psalm 9:9-10, and it still is today. The Lord has been with us through 9/11 in 2001, Katrina in 2005, the recession in 2008, and the Gulf Oil Spill in 2010, and He will be with us and act as our high fortress of protection, no matter what happens. E.g., I love what my very good friend Pic Cyr gave me in a model sail boat that says, “Don’t tell God how big your storm is, tell the storm how bit your God is!” And the plaque that Cheryl Strauss gave me, which says, “God doesn’t give us what we can handle; He helps us handle what we are given.”

“As we face a new crisis of our times with the coronavirus, how can we show the Lord— and the world— that we trust Him with a joyful heart? I.e., that we are *not* people of panic, but people grounded in His purpose!” That is the key for us— not to panic, but trust God, and when we do that we take the focus off of ourselves and place them firmly on Him and therefore on others. Here are five “P’s” for our purpose which I propose for us: (1) Pray and quiet times (spend daily time with Jesus— we need Him at this time!); (2) phone calls (to others in need of companionship and prayer); (3) personal notes (whether by “snail mail” or texts and emails); (4) parent and child times (which includes husband and wife time); (5) people and problems (helping others in need).