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*Refuge: A sermon for Christ the King Sunday*  
Psalm 46  
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It's Christ the King Sunday, or another way to say it is "Reign of Christ" Sunday. For Americans, it is the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and for those of us who follow the liturgical calendar, it's New Year's Eve. In churches that follow the liturgical calendar, a calendar that follows the life of Christ throughout the year, every year begins with the season Advent, which is next Sunday. Today's scripture readings are traditional readings for this day, readings that emphasize the divine nature of Christ and the mighty power of God. Just as the liturgical calendar describes an alternate way of looking at time compared to the secular way of looking at time, so the readings for Christ the King Sunday lift up an alternate way of viewing security and power in the world.

Because we haven't looked closely at a psalm in a while, we'll pause and linger today on the beloved words of Psalm 46, which boldly declares: God is our refuge. There it is, at the beginning, the middle, and the end, and whenever we see something repeated like that, that's our signal to sit up and pay attention.

A refuge is shelter or protection from danger or distress. It's SAFETY. And that leads to the question, when and where do you feel the most secure?

For me, I love the feeling this time of year, when the nights get cold, of snuggling down into the thick flannel sheets on my bed, with the sound of the rain on the roof and the comfort of knowing that my husband who loves me is right there next to me. The doors are locked, I'm warm, I'm snug, I'm loved—best feeling ever.

But this could change any moment. I could get a phone call in the middle of the night that something has happened to one of my children. A fire could start—hopefully the smoke detector would alert us, but you never know. And one of these days, Rod or I will go to bed all by ourselves because one of us will most likely die before the other one does.

As I was reading this psalm earlier this week, I wondered: How would this psalm sound to someone who just lived through a mass shooting? How does it sound to a child who goes home from school to a situation of domestic violence at the end of the day? How does it sound to the homeless person dealing with a drug addiction, and how does it sound to someone with no health insurance who just received a devastating diagnosis at the doctor's office, or to people crowded into refugee camps? Saying that God is our refuge doesn't change the reality that these things happen every day, to people with no faith, and to people who have prayed every day of their lives.

When I was in Israel in the fall of 2018, we toured the remains of several massive fortresses. Herodium, Herod's palace fortress outside Bethlehem; the Antonia Fortress by the temple in Jerusalem; and Masada, that legendary fortress by the Dead Sea, so high above the ground that most visitors take a tram to get to the top. These mighty structures had unbelievably thick stone walls, and they were built to withstand being under siege for months and years at a time, with special systems for collecting and storing water in that desert climate. You can't look at them and not marvel at the materials and the design and the people power and the WEALTH it must have taken to build such structures two thousand plus years ago. Yet every single one of them was eventually breached, even Masada, even with its daunting height, and impossibly thick walls, and armed guards keeping watch night and day.

Today, it's just the same—no matter what kind of walls we build to protect ourselves, something is going to get in. Sometimes the more we try to protect ourselves, the more vulnerable we become, like the situation we have now with antibiotic-resistant bacteria. We badgered our doctors to give us antibiotics even when we didn't really need them, to be extra safe. A consequence is that today, according to a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, someone in the United States gets an antibiotic-resistant infection every 11 seconds, and someone dies of one every 15 minutes. We're in this frantic scramble now to keep finding new antibiotics, which is difficult and expensive to do, as the bacteria keep adjusting and becoming more and more resistant.

To be human is to be vulnerable, to experience loss and pain and suffering, much of which we did not choose or deserve. And we know that, that our success, our savings, our neighborhood, our good deeds and solid relationships, they help, but life sneaks in and sneaks up on us anyway. We can win every war, we can live in fire-proof, bullet-proof, burglar-proof, earthquake-proof houses, and we can wash our hands 50 times a day and someday, something hurtful and devastating will find its way in. It's pretty much the plot of every horror movie, and it's probably why shows like the Netflix series "Stranger Things" are so incredibly popular, because they take our fears, and put them out there where we can watch them on the screen and watch somebody else kill the monster out there instead of dealing with our own fears in here . . .

To be human is to be vulnerable, and God is not going to protect us from that. Yet at the same time, God is our only real security. It's not about God protecting us from natural disasters and terrible political decisions, but God being with us IN them. When the world is falling down around us, and we all have those times when it does, it's trusting that our lives matter to God,

that we are loved, that nothing is wasted, that death is not the last word, and above all as the psalm keeps repeating, God is WITH us. That is the ultimate refuge.

And we only know this when we STOP. There are only two instructions in this whole psalm, you know—the first one is, “Come, BEHOLD the works of the Lord.” Stop what you’re doing and look at what God is doing. What is God doing? Ending war and destroying the weapons that people use to kill each other. NOT helping one side at the expense of another, but ENDING. WAR. Do we see God doing that anywhere today?

The second one is those famous, famous words: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

I don’t mean to be pessimistic here, but I don’t think we know how to do this! I really don’t. Being still is the hardest thing there is! Fighting is MUCH easier. When we are being still, we aren’t arguing, we aren’t working, we aren’t accomplishing, we aren’t making lists, we aren’t checking things off of a list, we’re not fretting, we’re not comparing, we’re not judging, we’re not HELPING or fixing, we’re not numbing ourselves with alcohol or opioids or Netflix or social media. We’re just here. Some of us are really good at SITTING still, but our minds are going a mile a minute. We can barely handle the short time of silence we build in to our Prayer of Confession—if we’re honest, most of us are sitting there waiting for it to be over so we can DO something, even if that something is just singing, “Lord, have mercy.”

It’s when we’re still that the full awareness of God’s presence really sinks in. I think that’s why being with people who are dying can be such a sacred experience. They are STILL! They have no choice. And they have no more time for worrying and fussing and fixing. They are getting ready to go on a journey, and God is there with them, accompanying them, and they often seem to sense this in a way the rest of us usually don’t, even though God is just as present with each of us in this room right this very minute.

The good news is, we do not have to be dying to be still, to know that God is God, to relax into God's presence. St. Augustine taught that if we are still and empty within ourselves, we who are used to relying on ourselves, on our own resources and plans and problem-solving abilities, can come to God for all that we need. Be still and we will SEE that God is God . . .

The irony is that the more we turn to GOD as our refuge, instead of looking to all these other things we can see and touch to make us feel safe, the safer our dangerous world becomes. Because we aren't treating people as opponents, and we aren't hoarding and consuming more than we need of the earth's resources. And it does take incredible courage to live this way—that, and an incredible community of people to help us live that way. A good church can do that.

And doesn't the world need that from us, now more than ever? The world does not need church people to run around demanding respect and recognition for their beliefs. It needs church people to be courageously compassionate. It needs us to actively live the belief that God is with us, and also with the depressed dad and anxious mom and bipolar teenager and our spouse with dementia. It needs us to get over our fear of getting to know our neighbors. It needs us to live as though we really do know that God is with us. And that we know that God is with those other people, too. All of them, all the time. . . . that's something to celebrate on this Reign of Christ Sunday.