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Mark Manassee
markmanassee@culverpalms.org

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Psalm 46: A Safe Place for Ministry

MARK MANASSEE

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear...” Ps 46.1.

During our years in Nashville, Tennessee, Angela and I ministered as chaplains in a hospital setting. On a daily basis, we encountered people in trouble and fear. Each person’s story was a little different. Sometimes people were experiencing a shocking diagnosis like cancer or HIV; at times they were facing the long healing process as a result of a major burn or car accident. Sometimes family members had just heard news from the physician that their loved one was brain dead or had died in an accident.

GOD AS REFUGE, STRENGTH, AND PRESENT HELP

While ministering in all these situations we came to see that what people need most is a refuge, a strength, a present help. Psalm 46 is a powerful text for ministry because it recognizes this need; therefore it becomes a resource in ministry situations. Ministry in general, and crisis ministry in particular, speaks to people in their trouble and fear and offers spiritual resources that direct them to God as refuge, strength, and help.

However, before we can offer the spiritual resources of God as refuge, strength, and help, we are challenged to reflect upon the broken places in our own lives where God has been *our* refuge and a very present help in times of trouble. Psalm 46 begs us to look back to our own cries of brokenness and despair, and to remember God’s presence.

In a recent article in *Leadership Journal*, Tim Keel quotes the sportswriter Red Smith who once said, “It’s really very easy to be a writer; all you have to do is sit down at the typewriter and open a vein.” Similarly, our own experiences of loss and pain can form the basis in our hearts from which we do ministry, even if we don’t share those personal experiences at every turn. If we can remember when God has been a refuge and presence in our lives, we then have a place from which to work as we minister to others. In other words, we minister from our own safe place, where we ourselves have experienced God’s healing presence.

A REFUGE FOR MY SOUL

Five years ago I went through a very painful divorce that left my life a wreck. I certainly felt as though my life was in a pit financially, vocationally, and emotionally. There did not seem to be many solid places on which to stand. My prayers were mostly prayers of silence before God. It is hard to know what to ask for when things have turned out so poorly. It is hard to know what you really need. What I needed most was a place of refuge for my soul.

God was gracious enough to provide that refuge for me through times of silence, a small covenant group, and a mentor. No matter how intense the pain and how unknown the future, there was still a sense of God’s steadfast love. God’s refuge and strength came through God’s direct presence as well as through those

who acted on God's behalf. It is those memories of having my life fractured and rebuilt that help me minister to people in crisis.

I am in a better position to minister to others as I recall what was helpful in my own trouble and fear. There were those who stood beside me in the difficult moments, realizing they could not change my circumstances or fix the problems. There were those who pointed to God as my ultimate resource. And there were those who gave me a safe place to be and to feel what I was going through. I will never forget the one church member with whom I was able to share the pain of separation. After a particularly painful conversation Kay said, "Thank you for the privilege of letting me suffer with you." I could not imagine anyone who really wanted to stand beside me in my pain, but Kay did. God used her to be a refuge for my soul.

Terry, who was my mentor the last several years, told me early on in our meetings together, "I will not hold you up but I will stand beside you in the fire." Both Kay and Terry were the presence of God to me during my crisis, and they are wonderful models for ministry to others. They pointed me to God as my true refuge, and they reflected the presence of God as well.

MEDIATING GOD'S COMFORT AND PRESENCE

Ministering to others takes on an infinite variety of forms. Sometimes there are specific activities that we can undertake. I recall occasions when people needed meals, calls to be made, or clarification from a nurse or physician. But there were many more times when what the person truly needed was my presence, often in silence. It is in those moments of silent support that I believe we convey the presence and refuge of God. One of my poignant memories is of being with a woman whose husband was being taken off life support. We had prayer, and after all the machines were disengaged, we waited. The doctors and nurses left the room and only the woman and I remained with him. There we waited and waited. We didn't need to talk. Only the presence of God and the silent presence of another human being were necessary to support and comfort her.

In countless situations Christians are called upon to be God's presence in time of trouble, to point to God as a refuge and helper. There are many circumstances we cannot fix, but in which we are called to provide pastoral care: homelessness, financial chaos, marital crisis, illness, and death. To be sure, we can offer helpful steps and provide resources; but we can also point to the presence of God in the middle of the chaos.

The interesting point of Psalm 46 is that God does not offer us a trouble-free existence, but refuge and refreshment in the midst of our personal tragedies.

Recently I visited a 92 year old woman from our congregation who was in the hospital. After having surgery and a remarkable recovery, she was scheduled to go home. On the day of her discharge she suffered a massive stroke which left her paralyzed and unable to speak. Through my years of experience in crisis ministry I have learned that the fear of

being completely alone may be the biggest fear of all. As I visited her I knew there was not much I could do for her but to be with her. What she needed most of all was the presence of God. Even though her body was not working as she wanted, in God's mysterious way, God provided a refuge and comfort to her soul.

In Psalm 46 the psalmist speaks of "a river whose streams make glad the city of God." In the middle of the collapse of people's worlds, when "the mountains shake in the heart of the sea" and "waters roar and foam" while "the mountains tremble," God surprises us by providing refreshment. This refreshment cannot be predicted or scheduled. We may lament while we are in the middle of the pain, but we can remember that God promises to provide streams of mercy for us in our troubles.

The interesting point of Psalm 46 is that God does not offer us a trouble-free existence, but refuge and refreshment in the midst of our personal tragedies. Ministry in the context of Psalm 46 does not offer a gospel of prosperity or ready-made success, nor does it give guarantees against tragedy. But it does offer God's surprising refreshment. Frederick Buechner wrote: "It is not objective proof of God's existence that we want,

but the experience of God's presence. That is the miracle we are really after, and that, I think, is the miracle that we really get."

Not only does Psalm 46 offer us a theology from which to do ministry, it also has nourished and comforted sufferers through the centuries. It may be that the very words, images, and rhythms of the psalm itself help create a world where God is a refuge.

It is hard to know if Psalm 46 is the personal psalm of hope for someone in the middle of difficulty, the personal psalm of someone who has come through a crisis, or a national psalm for protection. Whatever the situation that inspired it, the psalm has functioned in all these ways and more through the ages, and it offers a basis and resource for ministry in times of crisis.

Mark Manassee is the senior minister for the Culver Palms Church of Christ in Los Angeles and former chaplain at Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

