

The War Within

Psalm 46
Romans 7:15-25

According to biblical scholar Mitchell Dahood, the last line of the introduction to Psalm 46 should be translated, “According to 'Maidens', a song.” The Psalmist wrote lyrics and set them to a popular tune about young women. Martin Luther used a beer garden tune for his A Mighty Fortress Is Our God—which, by the way, he felt inspired to write by Psalm 46:2a: “Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change”. I am not saying Central Presbyterian ought to reset the lyrics of our hymns to rap tunes from the musical Hamilton. I am saying that I love how the Holy Spirit can inspire creative people in all sorts of ways.

The central inspiration of Psalm 46 is that God is our strength even when the world seems to be crumbling. We have never needed the comfort of this conviction more than we do now. We may not have secured fully the rights and freedoms of all, regardless of skin color, but God's plan continues to march toward its fulfillment. We may have anarchists damaging our cities, but God's plan continues to march toward its fulfillment. We may have to endure in-your-face political leadership (on **all** sides), but God's plan continues to march toward its fulfillment. We may still face a pandemic, but God's plan continues to march toward its fulfillment. Praise God! Christianity has always spread like wildfire among the poor and the oppressed. This happens precisely because of this promise that God's plan continues to march toward its

fulfillment even in hard times. Many of us have never truly experienced poverty or oppression. Perhaps now we can better relate. If anything good comes from the year 2020, this might be it: **now** we understand our dependence on God.

The central point of our passage from Romans appears near its end: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Left to ourselves, we do the very things we know we ought not do. Left to ourselves, we cannot seem to do the things we know we ought to do. The Apostle Paul wrestles with this, using terms like sin and death and flesh. We need to start our examination of his thought by explaining what he does **not** mean. The more Puritan of Christians have forever made the mistake of thinking Paul means that our bodies are evil. One of the earliest heresies to plague the church, Manichaeism, took this mistake to logical absurdity, claiming that all the physical world is evil. Only the spirit, the human spirit grounded in the Holy Spirit, can be good.

Paul’s thought is far more subtle. Yes sin dwells in our bodies—and also in our minds and hearts. Yet the holiness of God also dwells in all parts of us. Paul writes that he can **understand** the difference between good and evil. He can **will** to do good. He can **do** good. He can delight in the law of God. And yet he is “captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” All his wandering thought adds up to this: We are a mixture of good and evil, but left to ourselves we will sin again and again.

We must also explain how Paul does **not** understand sin. He writes, “Now if I do

what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.” This sounds as though he tries to escape responsibility by blaming sin, not himself. But such a division would be impossible for Paul. The rest of this passage makes clear that he cannot escape his own guilt. He is trying to write an honest description of the war waging in us all. He wishes he did not sin, but sin he does. He wishes sin did not have consequences, but its consequences are death. We are trapped. We cannot free ourselves. Only God through Jesus Christ our Lord can do that. Thanks be to God he does!

For months all anybody talked about was the COVID-19 virus. Then the black man made that video of the white woman letting her dog off the leash in New York's Central Park. Then three plainclothes detectives kicked in the door to Breonna Taylor's house and shot the African-American emergency room technician eight times, killing her. Then the white Minneapolis cop murdered African-American George Floyd, a nine-minute process recorded by several onlookers. Then African-American Rayshard Brooks, drunk, fell asleep in a Wendy's drive-through in Atlanta. After a long conversation two white cops tried to arrest him. He broke free, grabbed a taser and shot it at them as he ran away. They killed him with bullets in the back. So for a few weeks, all we talked about was the racial tensions that had boiled over yet again.

Then anarchists and a human stew of extremists hit the streets, rampaging and pillaging. These mostly white demonstrators began, as political columnist Michael Barone wrote, “using BLM as human shields”. Under the cover offered by the chaos

they occupied a six-block neighborhood of Seattle less than two miles from Murray and Eunice Pate's son's home. They were visiting there at the time. Across the land statues came down or got bathed in red paint. Calls were made to rename everything and to dynamite Mt. Rushmore and Stone Mountain. As one elderly woman said to me this week, "Now I don't know what to think. I don't understand all these people."

I said, "I do." Paul explains the whole thing. We live in thrall to sin. It saturates us, body and soul. Its remedies are physical, intellectual and above all, spiritual. Tightening the screws on law and order may achieve temporary quiet but will not bring peace. Giving total license to demonstrators only emboldens them. No, we must turn to God in Jesus Christ our Lord. As scholar C.K. Barrett wrote over half a century ago, "(We) need not law but deliverance." We need to seek deliverance as individual sinners, confessing our guilt to God and gratefully receiving forgiveness in return. And we need to get the word out to others. The remedy to the current crisis is confession, forgiveness, repentance, then speaking the Gospel. And there we face a challenge.

We live in a world decreasingly interested in spiritual solutions. How, then, can we possibly advance them? We start by asking God to empower us to live out our claims. As the old t-shirt said, "Your actions speak so loudly I cannot hear your words." We cannot win a hearing if we do not live out the love of Christ. We do not deserve a hearing unless we do. So continue to build relationships with people of all types and hues. Show humility. Make Christ's love concrete for outcasts. Speak the truth to power, but do so in love. But let speaking be one of the last things you do.

Yet the time to speak does come. To speak about racism, to speak about our nation's greatness—and its sins, to speak about the impact of various political philosophies on the poor, to speak about our faith. When you judge the time has come for you to speak, ask God's guidance for what words to say—and **not** say—and to whom. Pray for the courage to listen, and the courage to speak. We think we live in unprecedented times. We do not. The fear and upheaval of these days has no precedent in our lifetimes, but terribly hard times have happened repeatedly throughout human history. The Apostle Paul endured threats to his life, shipwreck at sea, hatred for his Jewishness, and more. His words about sin and redemption are informed by these struggles. They have sustained tests of this magnitude repeatedly. They will sustain this one, as well. Because God's plan continues to march toward its fulfillment.