

“When Balls are Bouncing”

Psalm 46; Philippians 4:4-7

June 14, 2020

When he was about 2 1/2, the Saturday before Easter Sunday, Natalie and I took Ben down to Gastonia to the Toys R Us. Now this was back in the days when Toys ‘R Us were more like a warehouse with long aisles, each one filled with toys. That day, we were letting Ben walk on his own in the store just a few feet head of us. But then, when he reached the end of an aisle before us, in a blink of an eye, he turned the corner and ran. It was obvious he’d seen something very exciting.

As it would turn out, it was a box of hand-sized bouncy, blue balls on an end-cap display a few aisles over.

And guess what?

They were on the bottom shelf – Right where Ben could reach them. So, Ben runs right up to it. Both hands plunge into the balls. Those hands emerged from the box, each loaded with a bright, blue, bouncy ball.

He looked at us. Smiled. Then threw both those balls down the long aisles...in opposite directions.

Boing. Boing. Boing. Down those warehouse-length aisles go those darned balls. Well, Natalie and I did what any embarrassed parents would’ve done. We started chasing after them. We didn’t want anyone to trip over them and get hurt. Natalie heads in one direction, me in the other, each with the hopes of getting those bouncy, blue balls before anyone bumbles into them.

The only problem with that strategy?

Well, it left Ben there with that box still filled with his amusing ammunition. Once Natalie and I corralled the first two balls, we looked back to discover Ben, again, fully loaded, bouncy, blue balls in both hands. I’m sure seeing Mommy and Daddy running around like madmen made him think it was all just a wonderful game.

So, what does he do?

That’s right. Two more balls – zing – go flying. This time, they went down the center aisle.

Now look, I remember that story so well because I can’t help but feel that there are times when the nature of our lives feels quite similar. Out of the blue, life takes a crazy turn and the next thing you know, you’re scrambling to contain the damage. Soon, it seems like all you’re doing is running.

A really dear friend said something to me the other day that made me think about that incident. She spoke words I think we’ve all heard and agree with. Speaking about the life, he said “It’s always something.”

And what she meant is that life is always presenting new challenges and obstacles. Just when you think things have calmed down, something else crops up.

If that doesn’t make sense right now to every one of us gathered here, I don’t quite know what would. After all, over the last several months, it seems as though our whole world has been turned upside down. Covid-19 arrived, zing, and our routines were upending. We were all running around like madmen, trying to adjust to our new normal.

And just as we were getting the hang of a life lived at social distance, long-simmering tensions boiled over, exploding into our living rooms, newsfeeds and social media. Another ball jettisoned with us left to catch up to it.

How often do our lives seem to entirely be us chasing the latest ball to be flung? One moment, things seem calm. The very next, ZING, a ball gets launched. Maybe when we’ve just about got our hands on that first one, ZING, another one gets thrown in a different direction.

Pretty soon we're exhausted. We're tired. And since it's "always something," then we can pretty well count on the fact that yet another ball or two will be let loose in our lives SOON, stretching us thinner and thinner.

It's in those times we turn to the scriptures and find great comfort in Psalm 46. Turns out, balls zipping all over the place is something that the writer of the Psalm knew quite a bit about.

Now last week, we were able to talk briefly about the ancient history of Israel, of how the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom separated and then, were both defeated over time. Well, most scholars believe that Psalm 46 was composed during a terribly distressing time for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

The Assyrian army, under Sen-ak-er-ib, stood at the very gates of the city. As you may have remembered from last week, the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom, carting off the people, 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel lost forever in the haze of history.

Now, the Assyrians were back and poised to do to the Kingdom of Judah what they'd done in the North.

In fact, the army of Sen-ak-er-ib was so numerous, their approaching army's footsteps would've shaken the very ground underneath the residents of Jerusalem's feet.

Can you imagine what it might be like to look out over the walls and see a conquering army poised to strike? A swarm of horses, greater than you could count?

To make matters even more disquieting, as they surround Jerusalem, Sennacherib sends one of his generals to make a declaration. In 2 Kings 18, this general declares that the people of Judah are fools to trust in their God. After all, this general points out, other nations had done similar things but the Assyrians had wiped them off the map and off the pages of history books. Who were they to claim that their God could do anything for them?

Now for those of you heading to college, I want to forewarn you, you're likely soon to hear similar things only they won't be couched in terms quite so sinister. You will, though, likely experience the doubting of your faith or even the denigration of the Christian religion.

And I want you to know, it is easy to lose heart. Simple to lose one's way when the stream of upper academic seems to be pushing against you. Remember, the academy, that upper end of education in which all your professors and TA's will be within, reject the very premise of the reasonableness of faith of any kind. They do so because, epistemologically, they do not believe God is knowable.

Epistemology is just a fancy-schmancy way of saying, "how things are known." The claim of the educational system is this – because God can't be known, like I know you or a table even, that faith is just a mind-game.

From this false and, I might add, unproveable assumption, comes a belief many professors and TA's hold that faith is some childish belief in an imaginary friend with no real bearing or meaning in this world.

They're wrong, of course and, should you even want to dig into this in real detail, I encourage you to come and talk to me. Believe me when I tell you, there is so much more to Christian beliefs than a mere fairy tale with a happy ending. In some very real, and very explainable ways, the presuppositions made by most academicians are founded upon faulty understandings of the Bible.

But, regardless of that, I want you to hear the words of the Psalm which come as nearly all hope is extinguished and the end seems nigh.

In the midst of that terrible time, the Psalmist makes a grand declaration – "*God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in times of trouble.*"

This is the declaration of someone who has seen a few days under the sun. A person who has experienced the presence and protection of God in those times when help just didn't seem possible.

Though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling WE WILL NOT FEAR, the Psalmist declares.

Y'all, I'm really blessed to have several nearly life-long friends. One of them moved out to San Francisco about 10 years ago. I'll never forget him telling me about his first experience with an earthquake. What I recollect in two things in what he told me. First, how it came without warning. One moment he was in his home office, doing some work, the next thing he knew, the ground beneath him was no longer stable. He told me that he never quite realized just how much he'd taken for granted the stability of the ground beneath his feet until it was gone in the blink of an eye.

And the second thing he told me was that, following the quake, he realized just how little control of his own life and safety he, or any of us for that matter, have.

I think we can relate.

After all, we didn't cause the Covid pandemic to happen, yet we are left to deal with its' lingering, lurking presence.

Nor did we directly precipitate the present distress the country is experiencing, yet we are all dealing with its consequences.

The earth gives way.

The waters roar and foam.

The mountains tumble in our lives.

From within the midst of their fears and their struggles and their anxiety came these powerful and comforting words from the Psalmist.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved."

And the most comforting thing these verses reveal is that we're never alone. God is a very present help. The Lord of Hosts is WITH US.

It means that He's here. God's with us. This moment. Every moment.

Christians believe that by the power of the Holy Spirit, God is with us everywhere we go. We take no step, encounter no obstacle, we face no tumult or disaster, we don't chase ANY ball apart from the one who created us, loved us enough to redeem us through Jesus Christ, and who sustains us by the Holy Spirit.

God is in the midst of his city.

And we might wonder where EXACTLY IS that city. We'd want to be there, in that city, right? Is it Jerusalem? Is it Charlotte? Is it Mount Holly?

What's interesting to note is that the comfort isn't in the physical refuge of the city's walls. Take for example the fact that no river actually runs through the city of Jerusalem which the Psalm points us to. What makes it verdant and life-sustaining isn't an *actual* stream but rather the refreshing, ongoing presence of God.

And so, the psalmist isn't saying take refuge in an actual city. Safety isn't to be found within a municipality like Charlotte or Rock Hill or Jerusalem. The city the psalm conjures is the city which dwells within your heart. For the Lord of Hosts is with us there.

And that's all fine well and good. God is with us.

But if you're like me, chances are you're thinking it's easy to remember that here at the church, but where will that comfort and assurance be with the next upheaval comes. Where will God's refuge be when the next ball gets launched and it feels like all we're ever doing is chasing after them? Will

God be there when I have my doctor's appointment next week? Will God be there as I get a C in my first college class or I encounter difficulty at my first, real job?

It's always something, right?

And we have this human tendency to want to handle things for ourselves, don't we? I'll never forget that stage little kids go through when they just have to do everything by themselves. Even though it would be like a thousand times easier for their parents to do a particular task for them, they've got to attempt it themselves. And this is a good thing in some regards. But what do kids do when it becomes apparent that, as much as they might want do, the present task is just impossible for them to accomplish?

They ask for help, don't they?

Oh, if we could do likewise. But there's something in us, some stubborn pride that speaks within telling us that we've just got to go corral those bouncy blue balls on our own, even if it exhausts us.

Here, I think we could learn a little something from St. Augustine. Augustine believed that God's refuge is only open to us once we're seized by the knowledge that we can offer NO refuge to ourselves. We don't find safety and peace in ourselves and so in some ways it's wrong to fight for those things by our own hands.

Augustine writes "But the contentious uproar in the human mind is oblivious at times to God's mercy and grace. So to this uproar the command is given "Be still and know that I am God. Clear your minds of their anxious noise. Don't argue with God. Don't take up arms against him. Be still, because you no longer have anything to fight with. If you are still and empty within yourselves, you who formerly presumed on yourselves may entreat me for all you need. *For I am all you really need. Be still, and you will see that I AM GOD!*"

You know, the more I think about it, our time chasing those bouncy blue balls at the Toys 'R Us might've gone on a whole lot longer had it not been for Natalie. I keep telling y'all, she's the smart one. You see, rather quickly, Natalie sized up the issue and she called out to me. "Jason, grab hold of Ben!"

I'd been married long enough to know that when Natalie asks me to do something, it generally works. So, I grabbed ahold of little Ben and, what do you know? The problem of those bouncy, blue balls was busted.

Now I am by no means suggesting that God is a maniacal two-year-old causing the world problems just to get your attention and that by drawing near to him, life will stop presenting difficulty. If only it were that easy. Rather, I am suggesting that, in grabbing hold of God in Christ, we find the very peace Paul talks about in Philippians, the kind that surpasses all understanding.

Help in times of trouble. Shelter from the storm.

But I'm convinced that if we are not actively working on our relationship with Jesus, we will all be tempted when the balls start flying to start chasing them, quickly depleting our meager ourselves.

So how do we do that?

Just like with any relationship, we work on it.

So many Christians believe all the work of their faith is done right here, in a 55-minute worship sprint on Sunday morning but that's far from being accurate. The truth of the generations is that those who experience that quietude of God amidst the storms of life were actively engaged in the relationship with Jesus Christ prior to the skies darkening and the thunder starting to rumble.

And it isn't that difficult, not really. Actually, when you read the Scriptures you begin to understand that you were made for communion with God.

First off, establish a routine of daily prayer. How many of us forestall our prayer life until we're in one of life's foxholes?

If you aren't engaging in a daily time of prayer, I encourage you to begin that habit soon. Perhaps take a moment following worship and place a reminder on your phone or calendar. Believe it or not, statistics indicate you're just 3 weeks from fully cementing a habit which will remain with you the remainder of your days.

Paul in Philippians writes, *"The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."*

The second thing you do in order to grow your relationship with Jesus is to read his Word. I know, to many, this seems like a Herculean task. But it need not be, I assure you.

Start reading a Psalm per day. Believe me when I tell you, that isn't going to represent a huge chunk of time. And doing so will continually engage you with the assurances of God's protection and provision. You'll hear the language of the Word of God and experience just how irreplaceable it is.

"Be still and know that I am God".

I'm proudly a child of the 70's. Consequently, one of those movies that just always seems to reverberate in my mind is "Star Wars." When I think of being still and just trusting God, my mind returns to that fateful moment in the movie when the young Luke Skywalker is racing through the Death Star, tie-fighters behind him. He's got to bullseye an exhaust port about the size of a swamp rat, whatever that is. Into his head comes the voice of his mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi. "Use the Force Luke."

So, he turns off the targeting system. He relaxes a moment. He's still. And then he begins to just trust a power invisible to the naked eye.

What I like about that particular scene is how Luke is called into a moment a reflection in the midst of all that's going on. They're still things to be done. They're still fighters behind him. His moment of reflection isn't going to teleport him away from the events going on around him. Rather he emerges from his stillness with a new sense of power filling his life.

Be still and know that I am God.

Laurel Schneider puts it this way *"God is inexorable and constitutes the sort of refuge that doesn't weaken the sheltered. This is because God isn't a refuge FROM the world but rather God is a refuge WITHIN it."*

As much as we'd like those balls to stop getting launched around in our lives. As much as we'd like it to NOT always be something, a lot of times it is and those balls just keep zipping around us.

The mountains will shake. The earth will move. Kingdoms and nations will totter and wage war.

But God is with us. In those moments of exhaustion and chaos, God is our refuge and our strength.

Just be still, and know that God is God!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture and Quotes

Introduction

Psalm 46 – “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. ‘Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!’ The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

The End of Self

Augustine – ““But the contentious uproar in the human mind is oblivious at times to God’s mercy and grace. So, to this uproar the command is given “Be still and know that I am God. Clear your minds of their anxious noise. Don’t argue with God. Don’t take up arms against him. Be still, because you no longer have anything to fight with. If you are still and empty within yourselves, you who formerly presumed on yourselves may entreat me for all you need. *For I am all you really need.* Be still, and you will see that I AM GOD!”

Prayer

Philippians 4 - “The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

Laurel Schneider – ““God is inexorable and constitutes the sort of refuge that doesn’t weaken the sheltered. This is because God isn’t a refuge FROM the world but rather God is a refuge WITHIN it.”