

This past week we took a quick trip to Tahoe for my niece's graduation from North Tahoe High School. This will be the third graduation that my parents have attended in the last month: one in Virginia and two in California. That's a lot of traveling, but I was sure glad to see my dad just a week before Father's Day. Yet I'm kind of sad, too. Every time we get together, he is moaning about the state of our nation. While he's believes that things will eventually get better, he is convinced that he won't live long enough to see it.

I can understand the fear. We are living in a time when so many nations are in an uproar and so many kingdoms are tottering. So whether you are 8 or 88, the time is ripe for Psalm 46. Today we continue with our series on the usefulness of the psalms. We've seen how the psalms have been used as a hymnbook and a prayer book. Last week, we used the psalms as a spiritual diagnostic manual. Today, we're going to talk about the psalms as a wilderness survival guide.

While in Tahoe, Hank and I had time to do a short hike in the Desolation Wilderness. We wanted to get up high enough for a good view, so that we could, in the spirit of the psalm, “come, behold the works of the Lord” and see what beautiful “desolations [God] has brought on the earth.” But first, we had to sign in at the trailhead and pick up a day use permit. It doesn’t cost anything, but it does serve to remind you that you are going into a wilderness area where anything can happen and Hank has the arm splint to prove it.

Most tourists who dash into the wilderness for a day probably do so woefully unprepared. But even the locals can get into trouble. I remember twenty years ago when my sister took us on a hike with her first baby in a backpack one warm summer’s afternoon. Of course, we got caught in a thunderstorm. Lightning flashed, thunder roared, rain and hail pelted down, and our rutted trail flooded with water up to our boot tops. Huddling for shelter under some pine trees, we were cold and wet and my sister, as a new mother, was feeling pretty scared and really, really stupid.

Any good wilderness guide would have told us to bring a rain jacket, even on a sunny, warm day. But even if you are perfectly prepared physically for the storms of life, that doesn't mean that you are prepared spiritually. That's where Psalm 46 can help us.

It starts with "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." And if our faith doesn't start there, we are already in trouble. If this belief is not ingrained in us when times are good, we won't have anywhere to turn when times are bad. So the first thing our spiritual survival guide tells us to do is build up our faith before we hit the trail. Here, too, the psalms can help us.

Now if we can't find God in the present moment, the psalms teach us that we can always look for God in the past. Many of the psalms are prayers of thanksgiving for all the good things God has done. Considering all the catastrophes that regularly came upon the people of Israel, these thanksgivings are remarkable. When we realize that if it weren't for the grace of God, the Jewish people could never

have survived all those disasters, these psalms can be very poignant and powerful.

So for your spiritual wilderness survival, I suggest that you get yourself a sturdy, water-proof copy of this book and stash it in your backpack, so you can read the psalms on a regular basis. As you read about all the good things God did for Israel, you'll start thinking about all the good things God has done for you. Then you can say: "With God's help, I met that challenge. I triumphed over that trial. That crisis didn't kill me. That trouble taught me a very valuable lesson. I can readily see that God was with me then, and I'm going to trust that God won't abandon me now. So, I'm not going to focus on all the horrible things that have happened to me, some of which happened because of me. Instead, I'm going to give thanks to my God who has wondrously loved and cared for me."

There is no better training for the trek through spiritual wilderness than beginning each day with a psalm that helps us give thanks and affirm our faith. The wilderness will test us, but Psalm 91

will protect us. Just like Psalm 46, it begins with faith: “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.’” And to put some legs on those words, it goes on to say that God will deliver us from the snare of the fowler and the deadly pestilence. Even if thousands die around us, God will preserve us. “Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.”

This is an awesome promise that sounds too good to be true. I’m thinking, my husband prays five times a day, but he still slipped and fell on the rock. I have made the Lord my refuge, but I still ran into a big, black bear along the trail. And what’s worse, as I’m hiking along, I’m praying for all the good and faithful Christians who are diagnosed with the “deadly pestilence” every day. If we don’t want to believe that this psalm is lying to us, we’ll have to go looking for some deeper truth that is lying there waiting for us.

Every wilderness guide will tell us that if we are going to weather the storm, we're going to need a good tent. What Psalm 91 does is invite us to meditate on just what kind of tent God provides. This tent is the "shelter of the Most High" and "the shadow of the Almighty." It covers us and protects us like a mother bird covers her chicks with her wing. "He will cover you with his pinions [flight feathers] and under his wings you will find refuge." [91:4] When lightning strikes, hail falls and all hell breaks loose, our soul is safe and warm in God's sturdy tent.

What gives this tent the highest possible user rating in all the best wilderness guides is not just that it is well-made and durable. It is also eternal. "With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation." Now this is not a promise that none of us will die young. We may not get to live a long time, but God promises us that we will live forever.

Brian Simmons' translation of this verse makes this clearer. He puts it, "You will be satisfied with a full life and with all that I do for

you. For you will enjoy the fullness of my salvation!” [*The Psalms: Poetry on Fire, The Passion Translation*] As long as we choose to dwell in God’s tent, even a short life can be a full one. That’s a real comfort no matter what wilderness we happen to be hiking in. No matter what kind of storm we find ourselves in, there is God reminding us to “be still and know that I am God.”

I was thinking about this verse as Hank and I were heading into Desolation Wilderness. I was marveling at how Lake Tahoe is beyond blue and from a distance, looks supremely peaceful and still. And in a time when nations are in an uproar and kingdoms totter, it’s really tempting to go up there and just bliss out. Then I remember that Tahoe didn’t get so beautiful just by being still. The basin was created by earthquakes and the lake was dammed up by a volcano. In fact, the incredible beauty of Lake Tahoe is the direct result of a long history of cataclysmic movement. And I thought that what is true of this landscape is also true of our lives, as well. Our beauty is the direct result of our own history of earthquakes and eruptions.

And we have the fault lines in our society and in our souls to show for it.

But by being still for just a moment, we will be better able to see how God is moving in our lives. By doing nothing but giving thanks to God, we will be able to gather up the strength to do something for God. As my sister, who has worked on lake environmental quality for thirty years now, will tell you, they've managed to "keep Tahoe blue" not by being blissed out but by a lot of people being still and then doing a blessed lot of hard work.

That gives me hope not just for this great lake but for our great land, too. So, to my worried father for Father's Day, I want to pass on some hope from someone who will never be a father.

Richard Rohr is a Roman Catholic priest who runs the Center for Contemplation and Action in Albuquerque, New Mexico. On May 21st, he went to the wilderness that is Washington, D.C., to hold a "sit for justice" at a city park. It was in support of the Poor People's Campaign. Faith leaders from around the country are trying to revive

the campaign that was cut short by Martin Luther's King's assassination fifty years ago. They are calling for a moral revival in our nation, and Rohr's contribution to it was to lead the crowd in a time of silent contemplation. As one who faithfully lives in the shelter of the Most High, he was trying to show them that by being still and doing nothing for a while, we can connect with the source of the very power we need to do something.

Despite the rocks and the bears, Hank and I survived Desolation Wilderness, only to return home to news of a different kind of disaster. Just in time for Father's Day, I got to read about all the fathers and mothers whose children are being taken away from them on our southern border. Clearly, this country has stumbled into a moral wilderness. The psalms can still guide us, so I want my dad to take heart. I want him to know that even when this nation is in an uproar, we can still be for justice by being still for justice and we can do that because we know that God is still God. And then we can

stand up and do something about it, because the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.