New Year’s Day (2023)

**“BE STILL, AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD.”**

Psalm 46:1-11

Key Verse: 46:10

“He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God.’ I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.’”

*“Happy New Year!” “Feliz Ano Nuevo!” “Xin Nian Kuai Le!” (Mandarin)*

*“행복한 새해되세요!” (Korean)* God blessed us very much in 2022, even though 2022 was another challenging time for most of us. At the beginning of 2022, we were finally able to remove masks and were about to get out of the pandemic. Then before taking a deep sigh of relief, Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, and so many innocent lives were lost, and the damage has been enormous. As a result of the domino effect, the interest rate went up high, and inflation hit the global economy. Many parts of the world are devastated by global warming-related floods, drought, and hurricanes. Our nation is deeply divided politically, while gun violence killed thousands of US citizens, including children. We like to celebrate the new year and wish us a Happy New Year. I don’t mean to be negative, but many experts predict that the worst is yet to come. Realistically, we’ve got to be ready for whatever will happen in 2023.

 According to the Chinese Zodiac, 2023 is the year of the rabbit. How many of you were born in the year of the rabbit? If you were born in 2011, 1999. 1987, 1975, 1963, 1951,1939, 1927, and 915, you are rabbits. I mean, you were born in the year of the rabbit. The sign of the Rabbit is a symbol of longevity, peace, and prosperity in Chinese culture. (Pic#1) My father was born in 1915. But he didn’t live long; his life was neither peaceful nor prosperous. Yet, people like to wish for good luck. We hope 2023 to be the year of hope for all of us.

 Psalm 46 is composed by the sons of Korah, the Levites who served in the musical aspect of worship in the temple, just like our praise worship team. It was composed when the terrible disaster struck the entire nation of Israel, mainly through the invasion of foreign countries, including the Assyrian empire. Martin Luther’s famous hymn “*A Mighty Fortress is Our God*” was composed based on Psalm 46. He had to face many obstacles during his time of spiritual battle. Furthermore, around ten years after the Reformation, the black plague was widespread throughout much of Europe in the winter of 1527, which caused the death of millions. This psalm deeply moved Martin Luther because t promises that God is the Mighty Fortress that never fails.

 One of the most common New Year’s Day wishes I receive in New Year’s Day is, *“I hope that your life in the new year may be filled only with good things.”* I appreciate their good intent and wish me good luck. But all of us know that 2023 will not be filled only with good things. That would be unrealistic. Psalm 46 doesn’t offer empty promises that we would not have trouble if we believed in him. But it teaches us that we can have true safety and hope in God and Him alone. So, what shall we do in times of crisis?

 ***First, we should take refuge in God.*** Read verse 1. “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” We often pray, *“Lord, please help us not to get in trouble.”* But we must know that God does not necessarily remove risks from us. Instead, he offers ever-present help in our trouble.

 If we take a close look at the text of Psalm 46, we notice a repetition found in verse 1 and then again in verses 7 and 11. The Psalmist opens with the declaration in verse 1, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” Likewise, in verses 7 and 11, “The Lord Almighty is with us,
the God of Jacob is our fortress.” I particularly like the phrase, **“God is an ever-present help in trouble.”** It means that God is not indifferent to our problems. He cares for us deeply, and his help is ever-present, even though we may not be aware of it.

 During the last few years during the pandemic, we, both individually and collectively, faced tough and painful challenges. Some of us were confused and became anxious. But instead of trying to solve the problem prematurely, we decided to take refuge in God and sought God’s guidance through silent prayers. Even though we were not perfect in dealing with some problems, we could experience God’s timely help and guidance step by step. God was an ever-present help in trouble.

Look at verses 2 and 3. “Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the hearts of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.”

 When facing troubles and challenges in 2023, we should not fear or take matters into our own hands prematurely. Instead, we should take refuge in God through silent prayers and meditation on God’s words. If God does not solve our problems immediately, we should wait, believing that God will guide us step by step according to his schedule and in the best way beyond our imagination. It reminds us of Proverbs 3:5-6, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

 Look at verses 4-7. “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” In these verses, the psalmist expresses his hope that God would protect the city of Jerusalem, which was under the immediate threat of the Assyrian empire and the Northern kingdom of Israel. The psalmist was sure that God would protect the city of God because he firmly believed that Jerusalem was God’s dwelling place. But is that true? Yes and no.

 We now know that in history, Jerusalem, the city of God, had been destroyed over and over. Although God restored Jerusalem temporarily, she didn’t last long. So, what happened to God’s promise of protection? Why didn’t God protect his city, Jerusalem? Well, it’s not because God was not able to do it. The fact is that the destruction of Jerusalem didn’t shade God’s glory. It’s the opposite. It revealed that Jerusalem is not God’s permanent dwelling place. God is omnipresent, not limited to one place, unlike many religious Jews believed. So, when Jesus told the Jewish religious leaders to destroy the temple, they thought he was blasphemous. He also said to the Samaritan woman about true worship. “Woman, believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem… Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit.” (Jn. 4:21-23)

 It’s easy for religious people, including us, to rely on religious traditions rather than God’s will. The opposite of true faith is blindly maintaining a religious conviction rather than seeking God’s will. It’s dangerous to blindly follow religious beliefs without seeking God and his will with a new attitude.

 In the following verses, the psalmist takes a progressive approach. Look at verses 8-9. I want us to read it in the NLT (New Living Translation). “Come, see the glorious works of the Lord: See how he brings destruction upon the world. He causes wars to end throughout the earth. He breaks down the bow and snaps the spear; he burns the shields with fire.”

 The psalmist invites us to come and see? Come and see what? Verse 8a states, **“Come, see the glorious works of the Lord.”** So, what is **“the glorious works of the Lord”?** Verse 8b states, **“See how he brings destruction upon the world.”**

 Having read these verses, I said to myself, “Oh my, Lord!” At first glance, I felt confused if God would bring another destruction upon the earth. Look at verse 8 again. **“See how he brings destruction upon the world.”** (NLT) It sounds as if God is not different from violent humans.

 But when we look at it more carefully, it is not that God would bring another destruction upon the earth through violent military power. Instead, he terminates the destructive cycle of the world. How does God end the destruction cycle of the world? Verse 9 summarizes it. Look at verse 9. “He causes wars to end throughout the earth. He breaks the bow and snaps the spear; he burns the shield with fire.” World peace does not come by producing more weapons.

 World history is the continuation of bloody wars, one war after another. War is terrible, no matter how good a cause it may have. Do you know how many lives were lost in WW I? Around 9-15 million people died in WWI. How about WW II? Approximately 70-85 million people perished indirectly or directly during WW II, nearly 3 % of the world population. And there are so many wars going on in the world today, including the war between Russia and Ukraine.

 We often wonder why Almighty God does not use his power and authority to prevent these destructive wars. We don’t have a good answer to the question. However, according to the psalmist’s description, God, our heavenly Father, is not violent. Instead, he causes wars to end. How would he break all weapons and melts them with fire? The best example is Jesus Christ. Think of Christ, who is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of God. (Heb. 1:3). What did he do as the Messiah? Instead of using his power to destroy the Roman empire, he let the sinful men crucify him. In his unbearable plain on the cross, he cried out to God, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”** (Lk. 23:34)

We don’t see even a hint of violence or revenge in Christ Jesus. No, not at all. Christ Jesus was so full of mercy and ever-forgiving. His sacrificial death on the cross brought peace and God’s kingdom to us. His forgiveness is total forgiveness without any residue of revenge or anger. And through his complete sacrifice and forgiveness, his kingdom dwells in us now and forever. It’s the fantastic work of the Lord. Jesus overcame evil with good. He defeated the devil with his goodness. We can see and experience God’s kingdom, his wholesome presence, and an ever-present help in our troubled life through Christ Jesus. It’s truly amazing!

 However, it’s frustrating to witness that nothing in the world seems to have changed. The world is still running on the vicious cycle of violence, atrocity, injustice, and destruction. We are heartbroken to see our dear friends and loved ones sick and suffering in pain and sorrow. Many are suffering due to property, sickness, injustice, and violence. The list goes on and on. I often wonder why these things are still happening. It makes me feel confused.

But I found that Apostle Paul also struggled with the same things we struggle with. He compared it with birth pain in Romans 8:22-25. “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as om the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope, we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” (Ro. 8:22-25)

Paul’s main point is that the entire universe, God’s created world, including each human soul, is pregnant, so it suffers from birth pain. In other words, our life is meant to suffer birth pain. Being pregnant is a painful process for a new and everlasting life. So, we should not be discouraged or despair when we suffer. Why? It’s because we have hope to have a new and eternal life. (Pic#2 & #3)

 We, as parents, don’t want our children to suffer. So, we do our best for them not to suffer or to suffer less. Yet we know that we cannot make them not suffer. The bottom line is that each person has their share of suffering in this life. Some suffer a little more than others do. But we all must suffer without exception. Our suffering is meant for future glory. Therefore, we should consider that what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed to us when Christ comes again. (Ro. 8:18)

 Verse 10 concludes Psalm 46. Read verse 10. “Be still, and know that I am God.” What does it mean to be still and know that he is God? It’s an invitation to fellowship with him daily as we go through trials and challenges. Even though we may not fully understand many things in the world, we must remember that God, who knows everything, is working for the ultimate good of his children. Even though we don’t know Him very well, we are fully known by him. Therefore, we must learn to trust.

 When we face trouble, our minds and feelings get disturbed. We become anxious and fearful. We may fall into doubt and fear from time to time. It’s not easy to trust and be still. That’s okay because we are human. But we should quickly turn to the Lord by trusting him, who is almighty and ever-present, to help in our trouble. Someone may ask, *“Pastor, I don’t know how to trust. Teach me how to trust*.” Well, we can learn to trust God only by trusting him. It’s like exercise.

Remember that we suffer because we are spiritually pregnant. No matter what circumstance we may be in, we can be hopeful because every moment in the new year will be a unique opportunity to know God and ourselves more and grow mature. So, we are now ready to welcome the new year? ***“Be still, and know that I am God! Happy New Year!”***