

Shall We Gather at the River
Psalm 46
July 9, 2017
Northminster Presbyterian Church
Rev. Michael D. Kirby

Many consider it one of the greatest poems of the 20th century and likely the greatest modernist poem ever. And it contains no rhymes at all; its verses are thrown higgledy, piggledy across the page. And it sounds more like an essay than a poem. The poem? "Poetry" by Marianne Moore. Ms. Moore, who died in 1972 at the age of 85, was a child of the Midwest, raised in the early days of the 20th century in the manse of the First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood, Missouri, where her maternal grandfather served as pastor. She was known for her wit and dry humor, which shows in the fact that her most famous poem is a critique of poetry. The poem begins:

*I, too, dislike it: there are things that are
important beyond all this fiddle.*

Wow, a poet who's not so fond of poetry! But the poem's most famous line says this:

*"...when dragged into prominence by half poets,
The result is not poetry,
nor till the poets among us can be
'literalists of
the imagination'--above
insolence and triviality and can present
for inspection, 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them',
Shall we have it."*

Imaginary gardens, with real toads in them, that is the goal of the poet according to Moore — to create a world that is not exactly this world, but a world one can imagine, a world where real toads might want to live.

Such is the task of the poet in Psalm 46. This psalm is one of the greatest, most quoted, most influential psalms, and, indeed, one of the greatest, most quoted, most influential poems in history. Its imagery is rich; its structure is clear; its lifting up of God's power and God's pre-eminence is inspiring.

The premise of the Psalm 46 — it's there in the three movements — is this: The earth may crumble; terrible natural disaster may come. But God is with us still. Then, political structures may rage with war or tumble in chaos or overthrow. But God is with us still. And then, a view from the mountain top: see, where war is ended, there is God; where the oppressors are overcome; there is God, shattering the spear, breaking the bow, melting the shield. No political aggressor can overcome God. — It's beautiful; it's uplifting; it's inspirational.

The great reformer Martin Luther in Germany found this poem to be his greatest solace. When he and Phillip Melancthon, the great theologian and writer who gave structure and meaning to Luther's very pastoral theology 500 years ago, were facing difficult times

— when the nearby Catholic German princes would threaten them; or when they were facing unrest or the pressures of breaking away from the most powerful political and religious regime the world had ever known — Luther would say to him: Phillippe, let us sing Psalm 46. Luther's setting of the Psalm, "Ein Feste Burgh," that you know as "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" — "a Bulwark never Failing."

But Walter Brueggemann gives us a warning about this Psalm. It's one where we tend to forget that a poet is speaking and we tend to forget that this is an imaginary garden with real toads in it. Walter calls Psalm 46 a psalm of orientation because it speaks very powerfully to the status quo right now — right now the world totters, but God doesn't; the nations totter, but God doesn't; the nations war and God makes peace.

Walter wants to remind us that there was never one single generation in the history of Israel — in the history of the time when this psalm was written — when one could say that it accurately described what was going on in the world. For its entire history, little Israel, and then even littler Judah, was surrounded by the world powers of the day — Egypt, Ethiopia, Babylon, Cyrus, Rome. There was never a time when the poem was literally true. And Walter says that means when anyone pulls out this poem and starts using it like the national anthem — to inspire and stir the people to support the existing regime, in this case, the church of today — be very afraid because the poem intentionally ignores reality. Mountains crumble and thousands die. Nations rage and totter and we get the Holocaust that kills 2/3 of the Jews, God's chosen people, living in Europe and 1/3 of the global Jewish population. And instead of God breaking spears and melting shields, we currently have almost weekly unmanned drone strikes in more than 10 different countries, only one of which is officially in a state of war involving the US. This is indeed a poem that ignores reality.

But, Uncle Walter, who seems at first glance to not like this poem very much, then reminds us that the poem is too subversive for those who would use it to wrap themselves in the flag and mantle of God, to say: "Everything is great. God is on our side. We cannot lose." Because those that see this as God's "I'm the Great and Powerful Yahweh" song are missing the point.

Let's get back to that imaginary garden the poet has created. What is the poem really trying to say? How does it open? "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. **Therefore we will not fear.**" Did you notice? That's the only thing WE do in this poem. The earth does stuff; nations do stuff but we receive a command to be still and know that God is God. The only thing the poet says we do is to not fear.

The poem was written for those who are in the very midst of fearful times. And yes, it imagines a world that is far more perfect than the one we have now. Because the world it imagines is the world that exists when we place our confidence in the grace, the love, the peace of Yahweh. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Jacob and Rachel and Leah and Bilhah and Zilpah, who put their faith in Yahweh and were the parents of the 12 tribes of Israel, who put their faith in Yahweh and their family was delivered out of famine in the Promised Land by a long lost son Joseph in Egypt. Jacob and his family's life was filled with challenges and fears and disappointments but ultimately,

when they placed their faith in Yahweh, when they had confidence in God's love and grace, that confidence was not in vain. Life wasn't perfect but life was preserved.

In some ways I think this psalm is the exact opposite of that sweet song sung by young fraulein Maria in "The Sound of Music." She's being packed off by Mother Superior to tend to the family of the Baron von Trapp. And she's timid. She believes herself unfit for the job. So she sings:

*I have confidence in sunshine.
I have confidence in rain.
I have confidence that spring will come again.
Besides which, you see, I have confidence in me.*

It's a sweet song but a very dangerous theology. That's why Walter says watch out when someone in power starts singing this psalm because they usually aren't talking about being distressed. But they are usually trying to make sure people place their trust in THEM and not God.

As biblical scholar, Jim Mays, puts it this way: The "true subject [of this poem] is the God who will help the people in whose midst [God] has chosen to be...." The song does not invite trust in a place but in a Presence who wills to dwell with people."

The only status quo this psalm was designed to celebrate then is God, who is inscrutable and invisible and unpredictable, but nevertheless worthy of our confidence because this god is the God of Jacob's family, the one who has always been with us in good times and in bad.

So to recap, the celebration of power and might in this poem is not an invitation to say that because we have power and might that God is on our side or that God is even with us. Rather, it's a challenge not to put our faith in those very things, not to put our faith in our power and might at all or anyone else's because Yahweh, because Christ is a river:

*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 fall;
God will help it when the morning dawns.*

And so here is the heart of the song: The river of God's grace and love that flows through the holy city, the place of God's dwelling, this is a stream of life and love and hope. And water, the image of chaos, is now the image of life — water that is the source of life, water that can wash us clean, water that can cool the fevered brow, water that is life.

Today we have already been invited to have confidence in the river of life, the Spirit that flows in and through each of us. Today at the font, Katherine was baptized — as the waters of chaos were calmed by the Spirit, as the waters of rising tides and unpredictable floods became a source of new life and new hope when tamed by the loving hand of God.

Today's psalm is not just an invitation to celebrate that "Mighty Fortress" that is our God because sometimes that's not what we need. Sometimes we need to gather at the river, the

beautiful, the beautiful river, to gather with the saints by the river that flows by the throne of God. For this is a place that we can indeed be still, be still and know that God is God, that we are not God, that no earthly power or thing, no leader or regime is God or is worthy of our worship or ultimate confidence.

This is the river of life, the river of hope, and the source of our confidence — confidence that God's love will never dry up, confidence that whatever the world sends, God's love will not leave us parched and unfilled.

And so the river, this river is not a bad place for us real toads to hang out or at least to return to for rest and renewal after our encounters in the garden, as it is and not yet as it will be, as we work and wait for that day when this wondrous imaginary garden blossoms into reality, when we need never fear again, though mountains tumble and nations rage, when war is no more, when we can behold the works of the Lord and all creation is indeed the City of God. That's where the river is flowing, perhaps not in our time, but in God's good, dependable time. And so now we will not fear — no matter how insane things are every morning in the news — for Katherine, for all of the children, for ?. We will not fear, we will love, we will hope, we will work, we will continue to gather at this river as long as God gives us a song to sing. Thanks be to God.