

July 21, 2019

“The Unselfing of America: Unself-Help”

Psalm 46, John 4:1-15

After last Sunday’s wonderful choir concert using 6 well-known Psalms, we’re back with Eugene Peterson as he takes us on a journey through 11 lesser-known Psalms focused on the national and political life of Israel. They are political prayers/songs in that they have to do with life beyond the individual. When he says praying is political he means that praying is not merely a private endeavor between God and one person. All of our praying, scripture reminds us, has to do with life lived in some form of community. In fact, the subtitle of his book, *Where Your Treasure Is*, is *Psalms That Summon You From Self to Community*. 35 years ago Peterson called for The Unselfing of America. And this chapter, focused on Psalm 46, is entitled Unself-Help.

Peterson’s call to Unself-Help ourselves is hard to hear at a time and in a culture that is all about ‘Self-Help.’ From books and celebrities and pastors and motivational speakers we hear over and over, “You’ve got this! You can do this!” It’s not necessarily wrong to cheer one another on and build confidence in those around us, but at some point “Self-Help” isn’t helpful at all.

I recently heard a top NBA draft pick say, “You can be anything you want to be if you just believe in yourself.” While that may sound good, there are a bunch of young men who will never play in the NBA (or at the college level) – no matter how hard they work and ‘believe in themselves.’ But the “Self-Help” movement isn’t just out there – in books and talk shows and seminars. It’s in the Church as well. If we took a quick survey in Grand Junction churches this morning, I have no doubt that a large number of worshippers would agree that somewhere in the Bible it says, “God helps those who help themselves.”

[Not FPC people because we just finished our Myth Busters series.]

The self-help movement **denies reality** and actually adds to the mess we’re in. It denies the reality of what we’re truly capable of (I won’t be joining an NBA team anytime soon). It also denies the reality that this world and our lives are (and will be) in constant turmoil – or as Peterson writes, endlessly susceptible to violence. He starts the chapter off with a semi-humorous story about his friend who gets mugged on the streets of Baltimore and then leaves on vacation to the safe and crime-free Grand Tetons, only to be thrown from his horse and have his arm broken 😊 Turns out the mean streets of Baltimore are safer than tranquil Wyoming.

If you’re living on this planet and paying any attention at all, it’s hard to miss the fact that there are problems and disasters everywhere. They are endless and, at times, overwhelming. When we’re confronted with the tragic realities of life our first impulse is to retreat; numb out; buy a latte, pour a drink, or turn on the TV. If, by chance, we are ready to accept the fact that our lives and world are filled with danger, violence, and disaster (big and small) . . . our next impulse is to ask the all-important questions, “What can we do? Who is going to help?” Some brave soul

says, “I’ll help!” Someone else says, “Let’s get Billy or Betty to help solve this.” Still others proclaim that we need to “elect, hire, or call up so-and-so to get us out of the mess.” Our knee jerk reaction to just about any challenge or problem is to help fix it ourselves. Self-Help.

There’s that pesky word again: SELF. Is there another option?

Psalm 46 serves as a corrective. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1) How often do you and I overlook the help God holds out for us – right here and right now? How often do we turn to God in prayer, only as a last resort, after we’ve tried everything we can think of?

Praying Psalm 46 is a remedy to the Self-Help movement/tendency in all of us. It right-sizes what we can do on our own. [Embracing limits and growing in humility are good things.]

**Psalm 46 also magnifies** what God has been doing – and promises to keep doing – in the midst of the challenges and catastrophes swirling around us. Praying Psalm 46 helps us remember what is true about God: He is present, and He is at work. Peterson ends a wonderful paragraph which helps us focus on our “Ever Present Help[er]” by writing, “The great affirmation and insight of the life of faith is that help is being given all the time.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.77)

Praying and singing Psalm 46 magnifies the strength and presence of God. And when God is magnified, guess what tends to shrink? Fear! “Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake . . .” (Psalm 46:2) Peterson keeps reminding us that these Psalms aren’t ‘pie-in-the-sky’ prayers. They’re earthy and honest about life’s seismic realities.

A lot of people in Southern California felt the earth shake a few weeks back. But you’ve been shaken too. Am I right? Recently? In the past? And there are so many stories of how life keeps shaking us up.

Some of us gathered at Canyon View Vineyard Church on Thursday for our quarterly Transformational Prayer Gathering. Our focus this quarter was on veterans and their families. We heard one veteran’s story about returning from Vietnam carrying the horrors of war with him and then having to carry the hate of protesting Americans. Years later, he found new life in Christ, raised a family, and watched his daughter join the military. She served 4 tours of duty in Kuwait twice, Afghanistan, then Iraq. When she came home the last time he could see that she wasn’t the same. He begged her to get help, but she said that as a sergeant it would be seen as a sign of weakness. Not long after that, she took her own life. He was devastated and shaken, and went to a very dark place for several months. But he stood before us on Thursday – after getting a lot of help for a few years – free from fear; committed to helping others in the name of the “Lord of Hosts and the God of Jacob.”

Psalm 46 calls us to a fearlessness, while fully acknowledging that our earth shakes and “kingdoms totter.” (Psalm 46:6) It even calls us to gladness! (SLIDE) “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” (Psalm 46:4)

You don’t have to know much about the Middle East 3,000 years ago to know that cities didn’t exist or develop without a water source. They were often built on springs or near rivers and creeks. Minimally, there had to be a well to draw water from.

And what was true for every city in the Middle East if it was to thrive, let alone survive, was true for every person – including Samaritan women . . . especially one particular Samaritan woman. All the self-help manuals in the world couldn’t change a thing for her. Her life was a train wreck and nobody else was helping her either. The women of the village had shunned her, which is why she was drawing water alone in the heat of the day. At least 5 men had abandoned her through death or divorce – or a combination of both. A husband’s death would be devastating, as would hearing from a husband what was legal for him to decide and declare, “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you.” Can you imagine how many times her life had been shaken? How many times she trembled and tottered? The nations were warring around her, to be sure, but there was a war going on inside of her as well.

Jesus knew her story. And He not only wanted her to be unafraid, but to be glad. So He offered something that was not available at the well in Sychar. “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (John 4:13-14) **By the way, did you catch whose well this used to be? Jacob’s!**

Jesus was trying to help this woman know the same thing that Psalm 46 keeps repeating: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” (Psalm 46:7, 11) “The Lord of Hosts” was a title for God reminding us that He commands armies of angels; “The God of Jacob” reminded God’s people that He was an up-close-and-intimate God – willing to wrestle with us if need be. [See Genesis 32] Three times we are reminded in our praying that the powerful and personal Helper is our refuge/fortress, and ever-present God. Why settle for “Self-Help” when you can have God’s Help?

But we settle all the time, don’t we? We’re so addicted to self-help we don’t even know we’re doing it; that there’s anything wrong with it. We’re so overwhelmed by all the shaking and quaking that we rarely slow down enough to remember God is “in the midst of the city” (Psalm 46:5) – nation/world/family/business/school/neighborhood/marriage/church. How do we get this reality embedded in us so we can live out fearless and glad lives?

First, we change our gaze from what we have done or not done well, to what God has done SO well. “Come, behold the works of the Lord.” (Psalm 46:8) When was the last time any of us took 5 minutes to “behold” God’s good work? The second thing Psalm 46 tells us to do is “Be still and know that I am God!” (Psalm 46:10) Looking or beholding at God’s work is one thing.

But ceasing to DO anything so that we can have a slowed-down, intimate relationship with God is quite another. Loving what God does is a start. Loving God deeply, in and of Himself, requires our undivided and undistracted attention.

But there's a lot of competition for our attention, isn't there? Peterson reminds us that "Everybody else is noisier than God. The headlines and neon lights and amplifying systems of the world announce human works. But what of God's works? They are unadvertised but also inescapable, if we simply look. They are everywhere. They are marvelous. But God has no public relations agency." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.78) He continues a bit later, echoing the Psalmist: "Be still. Quit rushing through the streets long enough to become aware that there is more to life than your little self-help enterprises." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.80)

Peterson's own translation of Psalm 46:10 in *The Message* puts it like this: "Step out of the traffic! Take a long loving look at Me, your High God, above politics, above everything."

"Be still and know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:10) Besides being still, this Psalm reminds us that the powerful and personal God can be "known" intimately – the way lovers know one another. The word for "know" in Hebrew is actually a sexual term. We're not invited to "Be still" so we can learn more facts about the "Lord of Hosts." Instead we called to expose our full selves to God with the vulnerability required for husbands and wives to become "one flesh." And that kind of vulnerability is scary, isn't it? Is it possible that our busyness is yet another ploy to protect us from that kind of vulnerability – with God and each other?

In the midst of all the craziness and problems needing to be solved . . . with all of the do-it-yourself projects we have written down to accomplish . . . while politicians bicker and blame and make promises we know they'll never keep . . . God "summons us from self to community" with Psalm 46 – and invites us to know Him intimately, even as He fully knows us.

Knowing God is the best way to know yourself – the real you; [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality and John Calvin] and this includes knowing your abilities and your inabilities; what you can and cannot do; how you can and cannot help. Let's face it, we can't fully and finally help ourselves; but God is a "very present help" . . . anytime and in the midst of anything.

So why try to do it ourselves? Why not acknowledge what Harry Blamires once wrote? "In the Christ life nothing, nothing at all, can be purchased at the do-it-yourself shop." (Harry Blamires in *The Tyranny of Time*)

The woman at the well had a choice to make, and so do we. Am I going to try and fix this on my own, solve this on my own, take care of this on my own . . . or will I receive the Living Water offered freely by the One who showed up in this world and at Jacob's well to take away fear and make us glad?