Who’s Your Daddy?

Reign of Christ/Thanksgiving Sunday

Psalm 46

*The Lord of* heavenly *forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety. Psalm 46:11*

This Thursday, many if not all of us will belly up to a table laboring under the burden of more food than we can imagine eating, to celebrate what we Americans have come to know as Thanksgiving Day. We will eat too much, watch more football than most of the women and children in the house can stand, all in the name of the American holiday.

The Sunday preceding this day is appropriately called Thanksgiving Sunday here in the US. But because of where this Sunday falls in this particular year, it serves a dual purpose. Not only is it Thanksgiving Sunday, but Christians all over the world, including the US, observe it as Reign of Christ Sunday as well.

This Reign of Christ Sunday is intended to help us close out the year – yes, for the Christian calendar, today is the last Sunday of the year. Next week, the first Sunday in Advent, marks the beginning of the new year. So, you have permission on this coming Saturday to go out and celebrate New Year’s Eve, sip some champagne, and set off some fireworks. But I digress. Back to the Reign of Christ.

We set aside today to remind ourselves that, as the hymn reminds us, this is our Father’s world. We are not left to our own devices. God created the universe and has not departed from it.

I chose the psalm from this week’s lectionary as our scripture reading, not just because it is a beloved passage, but it speaks to this truth with beauty and eloquence. We often turn to Psalm 46 in times when we need the reassurance that it offers. When we hear those assuring words that opens the psalm – *God is our strength and our refuge, a very present help in times of trouble* – it brings peace and comfort. I have repeated it many times at someone’s hospital bed, as they linger between this life and the next. No matter what happens, we can be confident that God is with us: when we suffer, God is with us; when we experience great loss, God is with us; when the future looks bleak, God is with us. But there’s more.

We live in a fragile world. It was true when the psalmist penned these words, and they are true now and always. The psalmist was painfully aware of the fact, as well as the Jews who sang this psalm. They needed no reminder of the fragility of the world. Moreover, as opposed to those of our day, they did not understand the reality behind what happens in our world; they just knew bad things happen.

For the psalmist, bad things happen for a couple of reasons. First, bad things happen because nature can cause havoc in our world. He reminds his readers there are times when “the world falls apart,” [v. 2a] or at least seems to. He reaches into his handbook of hyperbole when he imagines a time in which “the mountain crumbles into the center of the sea” [v. 2b]. Think earthquake. Or, he pictures the sea as “its waters roar and rage.” [v. 3a]. Maybe he envisions a tidal wave? Finally, the apocalyptic vision of “when the mountains shake because of its soaring waves.” [v.3b] To the ancient mind, these natural occurrences are mysteries, inexplicable and perhaps inevitable. Stuff happens.

Today, science has shown us that humans, by their inattention to the care of our world, have caused many disasters we have blamed on Mother Nature. It matters little to them. The one reality that bulwarked their faith was simple: God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in times of trouble. Amidst all the variables in the natural world, God is. God’s love and watchcare are constant, reliable, and sure, no matter what catastrophes the world may throw our way.

Secondly, the psalmist observes that our vulnerability and hurt find their cause in human behavior. “Nations roar,” he notes. [v. 6] Israel was painfully aware of roaring nations. They experienced a series of empires that roared against Israel. Nations took turns conquering Israel. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and took the people as slaves. Assyria replaced them as oppressor. They were eventually followed by the armies of Alexander the Great and Greece, who later were conquered by the Romans. Israel knew the devastation that stronger nations could wield.

We live in tenuous times today as well. Nazis and Fascists did as much damage as they could before being repelled. The Soviet Union did its dead level best to dominate the world. Today China has used its economic power to seek world power. Because nuclear capabilities create the capacity to cause devastation, even smaller nations leave us vulnerable.

What were you doing when the nine-eleven occurred? All of us can remember exactly where we were and what we were doing. Even beyond the horrific nature of the tragedy, nine-eleven laid waste to the notion of invincibility of the US. It wasn’t even a nation, just some misguided extremists.

In the same way, we here in Hawaii can all remember when the false alarm of a missile heading our way filled us with fear. I remember sitting on that Saturday, alone and aware there was no way to protect myself or others. Life is fragile. As Isaiah tells us: “All flesh is grass. . .the grass dries up, the flower withers. . .” [Isaiah 40:7a-8a,b] Or, as the classic rock song by Kansas relates, “Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind.”

Now, if I were to stop and end the sermon here, it would leave us with a pretty bleak picture, wouldn’t it. But that sentiment affirming the transience of life is not the final word of the psalmist nor our faith. No, his parting assurance is this: “The Lord of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our safety.” [v.11]

So on this combined Thanksgiving/Reign of Christ Sunday, you may give thanks for all the good things you may or may not have: family, friends, health, a roof over your head, material blessings. And you should. But realize they are as transient as our very breath. But on this day, may we be moved to true gratitude that the Creator of this world, the One who reigns over it, this God is our strength and our refuge. May we offer thanks that no matter what earthquake, or hurricane or tidal wave may come our way, no matter what nation rises up and threatens us, in the words of St. Paul: nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our lord. Amen.