

**November 8, 2009**  
**A Mighty Fortress is Our God**  
**Psalm 46**

Some museums, art galleries, or exhibits you go to because you will know you will enjoy them! I love art galleries, because the real paintings are just so vivid and alive. I come away uplifted and energized. Other exhibits you go to because you know you should ... but you don't really want to go. And you don't particularly come away feeling uplifted.

The first permanent exhibit to be established at the Imperial War Museum in London was the Holocaust Exhibit. I really did not want to go through it. But I felt I should. It certainly was not uplifting. It certainly was not energizing. In fact it was depressing. It was disturbing. But it was deeply moving. And, in a profound way, I know I needed to visit that exhibit and I am a better person for it. This is a time of year when we remember the atrocities of injustice and horrors of war. We remember the horrors of the holocaust, genocides, and suffering caused by war. We remember those who fought - and often died - to preserve the freedoms we enjoy.

This is a time, also, to reflect upon the need for peace in our world today. We can think of Canadians seeking to bring peace in war torn areas like Afghanistan. We can pray for their safety, their work of peace-making, and the people with whom they work.

In our congregation, I am very aware that we come to this time of year with a mixture of emotions and theologies. Some of us come out of pacifist religious traditions when this is a difficult time to deal with. Some of us come out of a theological understanding of "just wars." Some have served in Armed Forces. Some have experienced the horror of war first hand. Our purpose today is not to debate the theology of war, but to be honest about the fact that in the past - and right now, today - war, pain, and suffering is a harsh reality. How do we, as the people of God, respond? How do we live, as God's people, in these violent times?

*1. We remember we are the People of God*

We are the people of God. *"Hopes placed in mortals die with them; all the promise of their power comes to nothing"* Solomon reminds us (Proverbs 11:7), but

- *"Those who fear the LORD have a secure fortress, and for their children it will be a refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death."* (Proverbs 14:26-27)
- *"The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe."* (Proverbs 18:10)

Ultimately our safety and security is in God - not armies, missiles, tanks or guns. Ultimately we are in His hands. Those of us who come from a variety of theological backgrounds may take this and interpret it differently. Those from a Mennonite tradition, for instance, will take this to mean that we should never combat violence with violence, but maintain a pacifist stance, trusting

the in the Lord's care and protection. Those from other Christian traditions would maintain that trust in the Lord means that we trust His wisdom, guidance, and protection as we defend ourselves, or when we defend innocent victims of violence and aggression. These traditions suggest that in the case of a "just" war, we can defend the innocent and protect ourselves.

One of the strengths of our Baptist tradition is that we can dialogue about some of the not-essential-to-salvation aspects of our understanding of Scripture, including our different perspectives on pacifism (or not). The underlying principle is still a foundational faith in God. At the end of the day, we know that it is God who is the source of our strength and hope.

Martin Luther faced bitter persecution from the religious authorities of his day. The Inquisition of his day routinely executed people who challenged the Church's monopoly on (rather twisted) truth. Fearing for his life, Luther wrote a powerful hymn based on Psalm 46, "A Mighty Fortress is our God."

## *2. We remember we are People of Justice*

*"What does the LORD require of you?" asks the prophet Micah. "He has shown all you people what is good:*

- To act justly*
- And to love mercy*
- And to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)*

This time of year we need to remember that part of our calling is to act justly and to love mercy. In our society we value justice. We believe a strong, fair, transparent, trustworthy justice system is a critical part of our nation. It gives us security and confidence that, as we live within the rules, we will be protected; meanwhile, those who break the rules will be punished.

*"The righteous care about justice for the poor," writes Solomon, "but the wicked have no such concern" (Proverbs 29:7). He goes on, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9). The tragedy of the Holocaust was that many of the Christians in Germany did not speak up for those who being persecuted. It was not that they supported the policies of the Nazi Party, but that they were silent. There were good reasons for this. First, it was a wise move in self-preservation: those who did speak up against the Nazis were often imprisoned or sent to Concentration Camps themselves (for instance, Dietrich Bonhoefer). Second, people benefited economically from the Holocaust - there was a redistribution of wealth which people could enjoy while turning a blind eye to the human suffering behind it. Third, in fairness, many people did not know - or did not want to believe - what was really happening. Fourth, what really could any one person do, anyway?*

It is easy to throw stones at people from the past. But the uncomfortable reality of our lives is that we know the world is not fair today. We know that genocide is not just a thing from the past, but has been the recent experience of people in Rwanda, the Balkans, and the Middle East.

On a global scale, we know that large corporations often treat employees, communities - even whole nations - unfairly in terms of wages, benefits, and working conditions. We know we benefit, economically, from less expensive products made by people who get paid pathetically, even by the standards of their own cultures. Within organizations, people get promoted based on who they know not what they know. While officially we don't like to admit it, age-ism,<sup>1</sup> sexism, racism, and other -isms are alive and well in our community.<sup>2</sup> Do we speak out?

Irish statesman, Edmund Burke is credited with saying, *"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil, is for good men to do nothing."* But what can we do?

To help us work that through, our international Partner, Canadian Baptist Ministries, has begun a "Live It out" Challenge that seeks to help us live our faith more completely (go to [www.cbmin.org](http://www.cbmin.org), links to "Live It Out" - there are tons of great ideas here). The introduction reads:

*"We seek to encourage and inspire Canadian Baptists to grow as global disciples. To proclaim and demonstrate God's love and justice in every area of life. To live simply, justly and faithfully.*

- *Live Simply: Make lifestyle choices that emphasize simplicity and sustainable ecological stewardship to care for all of God's creation.*
- *Live Justly: Seek justice for the poor and the marginalized through critical reflection on social issues, advocacy and acts of generosity.*
- *Live Faithfully: Be transformed from the inside out by the practice of spiritual disciplines."*

Specifically under the Live Justly piece they suggest that we might want to:

- *Buy fair trade products where available.*
- *Check the labels when you buy clothing to see where each item was made.*
- *Explore one issue affecting the global poor, such as the lack of access to clean drinking water. Then change the way you live:*
  - *Take shorter showers*
  - *Turn off the tap while brushing your teeth*
  - *Always turn the tap completely off*
  - *Reduce use of your dishwasher*
  - *Do fewer loads of laundry*
  - *Minimize flushes or invest in low-flow toilets*
  - *Use a reusable water bottle instead of buying bottled water*
- *Young people around the world can take action to help children living with HIV through a new action guide, "Prescription for Life," a joint effort of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, Education International and the Treatment Action Campaign.*
- *Find out who your provincial and federal government representatives are and pray for them regularly.*

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<sup>1</sup> Meaning discrimination based on a person's age - you are too young - or - increasingly - too old!

<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal people, in particular, feel this in our community. Many people hold the attitude that ALL aboriginal people are drunks, cannot hold a job, will be bad tenants, etc ... and will not give an aboriginal person an equal opportunity.

- *Contact one elected official by phone/email/mail to thank them for their public service and to encourage them.*
- *Read about the [UN Millennium Development Goals](#) and research one more thoroughly.*
- *Do some kind of volunteer work in your community.*
- *Explore one public policy issue that affects the poor in your community or province and bring it to the attention of your elected representative.<sup>3</sup>*
- *Research companies that use exploitive business practices and avoid purchasing their products.*
- *As you save money by simplifying your life, use these savings to improve the lives of others by supporting local and global ministry initiatives. Donate a portion of your annual income to overseas development for poverty reduction.*

### **3. We remember we are Peacemakers**

Jesus says, *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God"* (Matthew 5:9). We are to be people who actively seek to bring peace - to our homes, to our communities, and to our world. At a pragmatic level, Solomon writes, *"Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife"* (Proverbs 17:1).

Wiktionary lists four definitions of "peace": *(1) A state of tranquility, quiet, and harmony; (2) a state free of oppressive and unpleasant thoughts and emotions (peace of mind.); (3) harmony in personal relations; (4) a state free of war, in particular war between different countries.*

Ultimately God is the one who brings about true peace at a global level (see Psalm 46 again). And it is through our relationship with God that peace comes at a personal level, too: *"Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.<sup>4</sup> She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace"* (Proverbs 3:13-17).

We become peacemakers when we take the "live it out" challenge ourselves - we choose to live our faith. When we do that - when we remember that we are the People of God, we are People of Justice - and act on it - we will also be Peacemakers. Last week we pledged that we would acknowledge Him in all our ways. How are you doing at that? How can you live that this week?

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 First Baptist Church  
 1614 - 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3  
 (403) 327-2082  
[bruce@firstb.net](mailto:bruce@firstb.net)

<sup>3</sup> I choose to volunteer with the City on affordable housing issues because I think that is a justice issue that we, as a city, have to come to grips with. Once in a while I choose to write one of my political leaders about issues I am concerned about in our community - I try not to write because I, personally, want a bigger slice of the pie, but I try to write as an advocate for others who need someone to speak up for them.

<sup>4</sup> Remember that *"The fear (reverent obedience) of the Lord is the beginning (source) of wisdom ..."* (Proverbs 1:7)