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Our Ever-Present Help
Isaiah 6:1-8

Inevitably life is a series of changes. Some of the changes are joy-filled and wonderful. We begin to play the piano and learn to love music. We go to college and discover our passion. We meet our soul mate. A new job challenges us, and stretches us, and we find ourselves developing new abilities. We watch our children grow to become mature and responsible adults.

And some of life's changes are difficult, even heart-rending. We lose a loved one, perhaps our beloved spouse. Our mom and dad divorce, and we mourn the loss of our family. We graduate, degree in hand, but can't find employment, and feel like we're drowning in debt. We take a new job and find the office politics stifling. We develop a chronic illness or lose our driver's license and the freedom that we took for granted.

Of course, times of change can also be times of our greatest growth. My Senior High School had almost 4000 students, and I remember the knot in my stomach as I entered this huge, fortress-like building. And I remember enrolling at the divinity school in Edinburgh, Scotland and being unable to decipher the rapid-fire, deep Scottish brogue of my New Testament professor. "I'm going to flunk out," I thought. But I didn't! Times of change help us to learn new skills; they teach us self-reliance; they can force us to discover abilities we didn't know we had; they can lead us to depend more fully on our faith.

The good news is that while our lives inevitably change, our God does not. In a time of national malaise, the prophet Malachi assures Israel, "Hear the word of God: *"I, the Lord, do not change."* The Psalmist assures Israel that our God is eternal, immovable and steadfast, *"Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."* Or in the words of our Call to Worship, from Psalm 46, the Psalmist recalls God's sure presence, *"God is our refuge and our strength, an*

ever present help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea."

We don't know what impels our author to write Psalm 46. The Psalm is written in a time of crisis. In ancient thinking, mountains are the pillars that hold up the sky. And the sky is a shield that holds back the forces of chaos. But if the mountains tremble and the waters of chaos are poised to fall, we're doomed. So perhaps enemy troops surround Jerusalem, or a literal earthquake shakes the earth, or a regional war threatens Israel. We don't know. But "*nations are in an uproar; kingdoms are falling and the very foundations of life shake.*"

And yet, despite this crisis, the Psalm professes a robust confidence and faith, an almost a defiant boldness in the face of possible catastrophe. During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther bases his stirring hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, on this psalm, despite facing Rome's fury, constant controversy, and the very real possibility of arrest and execution,

*A Mighty Fortress is our God; a bulwark never failing.
Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing . . .*

*And though this world with devils filled, Should threaten to undo us.
We will not fear, for God hath willed, His truth to triumph through us.*

*The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure; for lo! His doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him.*

Despite the crisis, the Psalmist remains calm. He confesses that God is "our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble." He tells us "fear not. Look at the Lord Almighty, not your circumstances."

He reminds us, "*be still and remember that God is God.*" So we don't run hither and yon, imagining the worst, talking ourselves into being a nervous wreck. We're honest about our fears, but stay still to sense God's presence. For "*the Lord Almighty is with us, and the God of Jacob is our fortress.*"

Psalm 46 is personal and intimate, "God is our refuge and our strength." Try putting your name in the place of "our." God is Rick's refuge and Rick's strength! Let those words seep into your moments of anxiety, fear or uncertainty.

Psalm 46 is confident, "God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not fear." Over and over Scripture tells us, "Fear not." When Joshua prepares to enter the Promised Land after Moses' death, God whispers, "*Be strong and courageous. Fear not, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.*" When the disciples cry out as a storm strikes the Sea of Galilee, Jesus calms the storm, and asks, "*Why were you so afraid?*" So our Psalmist instructs us, amid life's changes and uncertainty, "Don't be paralyzed by fear. Life can be fearful; circumstances, in Luther's words, can threaten to undo us, but we trust in the living and present God.

God is with us; we are not alone; and we can freely tell God exactly what we fear and why. Be specific and honest. Write down your fears and offer them to God as a prayer. Remembering that God is loving and powerful. Usually God doesn't miraculously resolve the crisis. But as God infuses us with strength, courage and peace, we can face the crisis with much less fear and trepidation.

And our Psalmist says, "*God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble.*" So as we take our fears to God, we expect to find unexpected resources – a thought, a book, a conversation that helps us. God has many ways to help us find deliverance from the challenge at hand.

We are all, of course, facing a significant change. Next Sunday I will retire, and while we will stay in Champaign and our friendships will remain, my pastoral relationship with you will cease. Such transitions are emotional. I know I will miss the privilege of preaching and teaching God's word, working with Chuck who is a true brother in Christ, working with such a gifted staff who aren't just colleagues, but friends, hearing such majestic music Sunday after Sunday, performing baptisms and weddings, and proclaiming the promise of resurrection at funerals.

And I know you're anxious about this transition! How long will the process take to find a new Senior Pastor? Can we sustain our momentum? Will we find a person who understands our unique culture? But God's word anticipates every circumstance, so let me share what is known as the call of Isaiah!

Isaiah 6:1-8

As our text opens King Uzziah has ruled Judah for 52 years. He ascends to the throne at age 16, but has an unusual spiritual maturity. We're told simply, "*Uzziah seeks the Lord.*" He defeats the Philistines, Judah's arch-enemies. He rebuilds numerous towns, fortifies Jerusalem, invents mechanized defensive weapons, and greatly expands agriculture. He digs wells, plants fields and vineyards, trains a well-equipped army, and as a result Judah prospers greatly. For 52 years, Uzziah is a rock. Now Israel wonders: will everything come apart? Isaiah doesn't know, so he goes into the temple to pray.

There Isaiah experiences the majestic presence of Judah's true king! He hears winged seraphs crying, "*Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*" The vision is so overwhelming that the temple itself shakes. In response, Isaiah literally cries, "*Woe, is me!*" He knows he is unworthy. But a seraph takes a live coal from the altar of sacrifice and presses it to Isaiah's lips, declaring, "*Your guilt and sin is forgiven!*" Our God is majestic and almighty, but personal and merciful.

Then God asks, "Whom shall I send? Who will preach my word to my people?" Without hesitation, Isaiah, answers very simply, "*Here I am; send me!*"

Parenthetically this text outlines our Presbyterian understanding of worship. We enter God's presence and offer God praise, "*Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.*" So our services begin with a Call to Worship and a Hymn of Praise. But as we meditate on God's holy and majestic presence, we realize how we fall short, so we offer confession, seeking God's forgiveness. Such praise, confession and assurance of forgiveness prepare us to hear God's word in Scripture

and Sermon. And we respond to God's word by offering our gifts and our prayers, before being sent into the world to serve, with a "benediction," literally a good word!

But as you make this transition in our church's life, what do you do? You follow Isaiah's example. First, you pray. You pray for Chuck and the staff; you pray for our unity and growth; you pray for the Pastoral Nominating Committee and Session; you pray to discern God's call to you; you pray and pray and pray!

Second, whenever you feel anxious, meditate on God's power and majesty. In the ancient world, a King's death often means Civil War. So probably Isaiah enters the temple to intercede for Israel and her people. And there our omnipotent, all-powerful and ever-loving God offers Isaiah reassurance.

Third, keep your lives pure. In his last days, Uzziah goes to the Temple and brashly begins performing priestly sacrifices. To keep kings from getting delusions of grandeur, the offices of king and priest are strictly separated. But arrogantly Uzziah ignores the priestly warnings, and is stricken with leprosy. God will fill us with His Holy Spirit only when we seek and follow His way and will.

And fourth, as you pray, read God's word and meditate on God's promises. Listen for God's call to you. You may not hear an audible voice, but as you humble yourselves and listen for God's call, God will help you see where you need to step in. Chuck and the staff will need your help, support, encouragement and time. When you see a need, don't wait for someone to ask. Jump in and help, remembering that the work we're doing has eternal significance.

Here's the good news. You are a dynamic church with a growing multi-cultural outreach, and wonderful ESL, worship, and children's and family ministries. You have just completed a very successful ministry and capital drive. You have a Session gifted in vision and administration. Your Forward 150 Faithful team and Buildings and Grounds committee are ably guiding the completion of Phase 1 of Forward 150 and laying the groundwork for Phase 2.

You have a very strong Stephen Ministry program, a dynamic mission and outreach program, an amazing network of Bible Studies and small groups to nurture spiritual growth, and a host of innovative ministries like Mission Possible, Amateur Preachers, your Cuban partnership, and your partnership with the Sangla Hills Girls' School in Pakistan.

Even having spun off Copper Creek, our attendance still places us in the top six percent of all Presbyterian Churches nationwide. Since so many churches can no longer afford full-time pastors, there is a "buyer's market" for churches looking for pastors. And being in a university community, with a relatively low cost of living, trust me, you'll be flooded with applicants!

But above all, don't ever forget this promise, *"God is our refuge and our strength, an ever present help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea . . . The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.* Thanks be to God! Amen.