

"IN GOD WE TRUST"

"The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge."


Psalm 46:7

A Sermon by

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell

Preached in  
The Riverside Church  
in the City of New York

December 29, 1968



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2012 with funding from  
Princeton Theological Seminary Library

## IN GOD WE TRUST

"The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge."

Psalm 46:7

The scriptures are commonly referred to as "the bread of life." But on this final Sunday of the year, I should like us to focus on a passage for which the term "Bread" is inadequate. "Meat" would be better, "strong meat" at that, the forty-sixth Psalm.

The Psalm opens with the massive ruggedness of Norman architecture: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

Most authorities agree that this psalm was written to commemorate the miraculous deliverance of the City of Jerusalem out of the hands of Sennacherib in 701 BC just when it seemed that the Assyrians would sweep everything in sight. "Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea."

Martin Luther paraphrased this Psalm in his well known hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." In this form King Gustavos Adolphus had his entire army sing the Psalm on the eve of the Battle of Leipzig.

This Psalm falls into three sections or strophes. Originally each of these ended with the refrain: "The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge." In these two names for God there is gospel enough for each of us.

"The Lord of hosts is with us." This is one of the most frequently used names for God in the Bible. With the help of an analytical concordance, I sat down one day to count the instances of its usage but presently gave up for lack of time. It is an imposing and impressive term. It was the term that came to Isiah when he sought to describe his vision: "In the

year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, sitting upon a throne high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he did fly. And one cried to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is filled with his glory." (Isaiah 6:1-3)

Grammarians refer to this term as a "plural of intensity," Yahweh Sabaoth. In the second stanza of his great hymn, Luther chose to recall and retain some of the basic Hebrew flavor.

"Did we in our own strength confide  
Our striving would be losing  
Were not the right man on our side  
The man of God's own choosing.  
Dost ask who that may be?  
Christ Jesus, it is he;  
Lord Sabaoth his name.  
From age to age the same,  
And he must win the battle."

Rudyard Kipling felt its power, for in his well-known "Recessional" over and over again we hear the refrain

"Lord God of hosts  
Be with us yet  
Lest we forget  
Lest we forget."

Granted that this term has awesome credentials, let us go on to ask what it really means. When we speak of God as the "Lord of hosts" we are affirming two convictions: First: that God is Lord of nature's forces - the stars, the sun, the moon, all heavenly bodies, in particular, and all the forces of nature in general. It is timely that we reflect upon this affirmation in an era when so many feel overwhelmed by the forces of the world around them.

True, nature has its pacific side. We warm to the poet when he speaks of

"The quenchless stars, so eloquently bright  
Untroubled sentries of the shadowy night."  
-Robert Montgomery

And we can understand another writer who speaks of night as "the time when the stars come out to listen to the music of the seas." But nature has also its imposing and frightening side. Some time ago, I saw a cartoon that depicted a little boy receiving a huge boxer dog from his mother and father. The lad looked up into the eyes of the dog and beyond them to his parents and could only think to ask, "Are you giving him to me or me to him?"

The immensity of the universe in which we live has a dwarfing effect on our ego and self-confidence. If the psalmist with his limited knowledge of cosmology could ask, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" how much more do we feel the need of this question today. Draw near to these statistics if you have the courage: There are 88 constellations. The planet earth is 93 miles from the sun. In the Milky Way in which we live there are 100 billion suns or stars, 100 galaxies, and in each galaxy one billion stars. The surface of the sun is 11,890 times that of the earth. Each square mile of the sun gives off 216 billion horsepower of energy all the time. The sun is 1,300,000 times the volume of the earth. If you dropped an earth into the sun every second, it would take 15.05 days to fill the sun. Alpha Hercules is the largest known star. One could put 512 million suns into Alpha Hercules, 670 million, million earths. If we could drop an earth into Alpha Hercules every second, it would take 21,100,000 years to fill. Yet Alpha Hercules when seen through a 100-inch telescope appears as a tiny dot of light.

And what shall we say of the sea? The shimmering oceans are plunged in mystery. Almost three-quarters of the earth's surface is water. This planet

might better have been called Oceanus. Only two per cent of the water is sounded and charted. What do these waters hold as they fall to an average depth of 11,480 feet? Nor does the age of the universe flatter my three score years and ten. Fred Hoyle of Cambridge, using an IBM 704 Computer, has determined that the earth is at least ten billion years old. Even the lowly atom can terrorize us. We know that should the neutrons, electrons and protons misbehave just once, - Boom! and it's all over. When we assess the powers of the universe, we can be forgiven for feeling overmatched and pathetically undersized.

Hear then the affirmation of this text: These forces, vast as they are, have a master. They are under the lordship of God. God on creation's morning stood over against ~~them~~ and pronounced them good. This is the conviction that runs through the pages of scripture, especially the Old Testament. Listen to the psalmist in another place as he says: "The sea is His and He made it, and His hands formed the dry land. He commandeth and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof." (Psalm 95:5) Or hear Jeremiah as he breaks with his weeping long enough to say, "Ah Lord God! Behold thou hast made the heavens and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for thee." (Jeremiah 32:1-7)

Like many New Yorkers, I arose on Christmas Day in an apartment that was totally void of heat. Uncomfortable as the frigid morning air was, I must share with you the ecstasy I felt when I picked up "The New York Times" and read of the Christmas Eve telecast from the spacecraft circling the moon. Was ever Genesis I read under more auspicious circumstances! As the telecast neared its end, Colonel Borman said "Apollo 8 has a message for you." With that Major Anders began reading the opening verses from the Book of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep..."

Captain Lovell then took up with the verse beginning, "And God called the light day, and the darkness He called night."

Colonel Borman closed the reading with the verse that reads: "And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the water called He Seas; and God saw that it was good." After that, Colonel Borman signed off, saying, "Good-bye, good night, Merry Christmas...God bless all of you, all of you on the good earth."

"The Lord of hosts is with us." The term also means that God is the Lord of the armies of men. Even the warring legions of mankind march to a purpose that He has ordained who presides over the destiny of nations. Hence, the Old Testament speaks of Assyria as "The rod of His anger" and of Babylon as "The servant of the Lord." John Calvin was asked to moderate his view of the sovereignty of God. Friends suggested that he say simply that "the eye of God is over history." But Calvin would not agree. "Not simply the eye of God over history, but the hand of God on History." We are not at the mercy of fate. We do not sit passively before inevitably recurring cycles. History is His story from first to last: From Vietnam to City Hall, from Johannesburg to North Korea, from Czechoslovakia to Cuba. "One God, one law, one element and one far off divine event, to which the whole creation moves." (Tennyson)

The "Lord of hosts is with us." But the verse goes on - and well for us that it does - "The God of Jacob is our refuge." The fact that life is God's production is not enough. His is the power, granted, but is it a caring, feeling, loving power? Or, more personally, what is my part in it all? Am I simply a candle in the wind? Am I as expendable as a struck match? Are we nothing more than toys in the gameroom of the gods? The teaching of this verse is that God

is the God of people too, the God of Jacob. Dan Crawford suggests that we ought to read "The God of even Jacob." Jacob would never be anybody's candidate for Man-of-the-Year, you know, — conniver and deceiver that he was. He originated the game "trick or treat." He did the trick and took the treat also, cheating his brother out of a birthright and lying to his daddy. God is the God of a man like that! He cares.

People matter to him. Jacob here stands symbolically for the whole Old Testament community. We are not expendable entities on some orphaned planet; we matter to God, who is the "God of Jacob." I have always enjoyed Thornton Wilder's Our Town and no part of it more than that place in Act I where Rebecca Gibbs talks to her brother George:

" I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. The minister of her church in the town she was in before she came here. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said, Jane Crofut; the Crofut Farm; Grovers Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America."

" What's funny about that?" said George.

" But listen, it's not finished; the United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth, the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God."

And by faith we would raise that address yet one notch more, "the heart of God" as well.

"The God of Jacob is our refuge." How do we know that it isn't wishful thinking, a mere projection. How did the sons of Jacob know? They knew because of a mighty act of deliverance - the springing of the people out of the land of Egypt on toward The Promised Land. The axis of the Old Testament is that deliverance in



which God with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm redeemed his people. And we know for an even more convincing reason for our faith centers in another deliverance. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." The center of that reconcillation is a cross. We gather at that cross expecting to hear Him say "This is my body broken by you." But instead we hear, "This is my body broken for you." It is here that I know that though like Jacob I am a man of many sins, He loved me and gave Himself for me.

"The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." This is the God in whom we trust as we turn the corner on a new Year. He commands the powers of the universe and yet pursues the hearts of men. It was this that Oliver Wendell Holmes had in mind when he wrote:

"Lord of all being throned afar  
Thy glory flames from sun and star  
Center and soul of every sphere,  
Yet to each loving heart how near." 1

God give us the faith to believe that "The Lord of Hosts is with us," that the God of even Jacob is our refuge.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we believe. Help thou our  
unbelief,  
Where doubt would leave us with a  
cold and random world.  
Give us a sure sense of thy presence  
and a vision of the end toward  
which we move.  
Through Jesus Christ Our Lord.  
Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Hymn No. 89, The Pilgrim Hymnal,  
The Pilgrim Press, Boston



