

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Christ the King Sunday
Sunday, November 23, 2025**

**“Exalted in the Earth”
Psalm 46**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Today we celebrate Christ the King Sunday—and it is very much a celebration. In the hymns and music, the liturgy and readings, we hear the Good News that Christ the King reigns over the world. As one Presbyterian resource describes this day: “Christ reigns supreme. Christ rules in peace. [...] Christ is the center of the universe, the ruler of all history [...] Christ rules above all earthly powers!” As we recognize Christ as King, the tone is triumphant and celebratory.

And yet! And yet, I think we can’t help but feel a tension. Even as we announce that Christ rules creation, we’re disturbed by the suffering around us; even as we declare that Christ is King, we’re keenly aware of the brokenness of the world. And if we’re honest, this leads to hard questions and a sense of tension: as we celebrate Christ’s rule over creation, we look around at the state of the world and ask, ‘Is this what Christ’s rule is supposed to look like?’

It’s good to be honest about this, because if we didn’t honestly acknowledge the tension of this day, then Christ the King Sunday might feel like a fiction, like a kind of religious break from reality, a mere distraction from the worries and fears of day-to-day life. If ignored this tension, too afraid to ask hard questions of our faith, then we would also miss out on the profound meaning of this day—because, in recognizing this tension, we discover that the hope and promise of this day is precisely for those who feel this tension deeply, who seek to honour Christ’s reign right in the midst of our hurting world.

Today we recited Psalm 46, which bears witness to this same kind of tension between the rule of God and the brokenness of the world. This psalm declares that God is sovereign and ruling, protective and powerful (cf. Olson); and yet, this psalm is also totally realistic about a world in disarray, where God’s rule can seem utterly absent.

The psalmist describes two dangers, two sources of anxiety and uncertainty: the natural world and the political world (Hooke), the threats of nature and the threats of the nations. The psalmist first envisions a frightening collapse of nature:

“though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult” (vv. 2-4).

You know, it’s the poetry of this psalm that was behind the lyrics of Ben E. King’s lyrics in “Stand by Me”—

“If the sky that we look upon should tumble and fall
Or the mountains should crumble to the sea”

—all evoking these frightening images of the natural world dissolving, of nature collapsing in on itself: mountains shaking like a leaf, oceans bubbling, the earth itself coming apart. The way the psalmist

describes it, it's like creation undoing itself, like the creative order coming unspooled (cf. Hooke); it really is a frightening picture.

And second, the psalmist names the no-less-frightening prospect of political dangers, the threats posed by wars and rival nations:

“The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter” (v. 6).

The psalmist lived in unstable times. In the history of the Old Testament, Israel bordered on bigger, more powerful, more aggressive powers: Israel was threatened, and later conquered, by the Assyrian Empire and then by the Babylonian Empire. For a small people, sandwiched between mighty empires, geopolitical news tended to be bad news—and whenever those empires went on the attack, and “kings and kingdoms threaten[ed]” (Peterson), it could spell disaster.

And in the poetry of this psalm, we find similar language describing the threats of the nature and the threat of the nations: “just as the waters roared, so the nations roar; just as the mountains shook, so the kingdoms shake” (Tull). These poetic echoes in the language show how frightening the threat of invasion really was: for the psalmist, when a nearby kingdom threatens invasion, that's no less frightening than a collapsing mountain...

Today, as we celebrate Christ's reign over all creation, we hear what threatened the psalmist...and really, the psalmist's fears are very much like the fears of today. We worry about environmental damage and natural disasters; the psalmist feared that “the earth should change” (v. 2) and “its waters roar and foam” (v. 3). We worry about wars and geopolitical instability; the psalmist feared that “[t]he nations are in an uproar” and “the kingdoms totter” (v. 6).

The psalmist bluntly acknowledges the brokenness of the world; and yet, nevertheless, despite this honest recognition of what is wrong with the world, the psalmist also remains resolutely confident in the sovereign rule of God. We heard those two threats the psalmist describes—and yet, the psalmist enfolds these threats within the language of trust in God. “*Therefore we will not fear,*” the psalmist declares, “though the earth should change, the mountains shake” (v. 2). “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; *he utters his voice, the earth melts*” (v. 6). But how? How can the psalmist manage this kind of trust in God's rule amid a dangerous, destabilized world? How can the psalmist trust in God's sovereignty even when the seas and kingdoms roar and shake?

There is a theme that runs right through this psalm—and that theme is the presence of God. The psalm begins, “God is our refuge and strength, a very *present* help in trouble” (v. 1). In this psalm, “God is not a refuge from the world and its excesses, but a refuge in it” (Schneider); and God is a refuge in this world—in its brokenness and threats, in its roaring and foaming—because, the psalmist promises, because God remains present with us in this world as it is.

Listen to how the psalmist weaves together the refuge that God gives, the help that God offers—with the promise that God is here, present, with us:

“God is our refuge and strength,

a very *present* help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear [...].

God is *in the midst of the city*; it shall not be moved;

God will help it when the morning dawns.

The LORD of hosts *is with us*;

the God of Jacob *is our refuge*.
'Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted *among the nations*,
I am exalted *in the earth*.'
The LORD of hosts *is with us*;
the God of Jacob *is our refuge*" (vv. 1-2, 5, 7, 10-11).

The psalmist is honest about all the threats that can frighten us; the psalmist is also honest about God's promise to remain with us amid these threats. The psalmist recognizes the brokenness of our world, yet the psalmist also recognizes that "this sovereign, powerful God is with us, in the midst of the city, in the midst of the chaotic natural world, in the midst of our lives" (Olson). I'm reminded of something the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell, less than a year before he was executed by the Nazi regime: "What is certain," he wrote, "is that we may always live aware that God is near and present with us" (DBWE 8:515).

Or as one minister puts it: "This psalm [...] proclaims faith in God's protection and presence, [...] while being [...] realistic about the way things actually are in the world. [...] The psalm offers a vision of faithful life that [...] acknowledges the dangers and difficulties that surround us, but [offers] an attitude of trust in God even in the midst of these challenges. [...] This faith does not mean shutting our eyes to tumult, wars, and suffering; it means knowing that in the midst of all that threatens us, God is also there, and God ultimately reigns" (Hooke).

Today, on Christ the King Sunday, we sense a tension—yet in this psalm, we find a biblical witness that faith isn't about acknowledging the brokenness of the world or celebrating God's reign, but rather about celebrating the loving reign of God even amid the brokenness of the world. Thank God. Amen.