

Sermon for August 16, 2026
A Story Problem

Scripture Readings:

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.

2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,

3 though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.[c]

4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.

5 God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.

6 Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

7 The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

8 Come and see what the Lord has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.

9 He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.

He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields[d] with fire.

10 He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."

11 The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Hebrews 12:1-3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

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I try not to be a “keyboard warrior.” That’s the term for people who argue about politics and religion on social media sites. I find that, in most cases, it’s more of a shouting match than a meaningful discussion. However, every once in a while, I see a good opportunity to inject a little theology into the online space. One of those opportunities arose in a relatively strange place. It was an intersection between the popular television sitcom “Big Bang Theory,” and the classic 1980s adventure film, “Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark.”

There’s a clip from the television show that regularly does the rounds on the internet. One of the main characters, Sheldon, decides to show one of his favorite movies to his new girlfriend, Amy. The movie is Raiders of the Lost Ark. When it’s finished, Amy says that she enjoyed the movie except for the story problem. Sheldon, growing somewhat disturbed, asks, “what story problem?” Amy points out that the main character, Indiana Jones, doesn’t accomplish anything over the course of the movie. The end result would be essentially the same if he had stayed at home and taught his scheduled classes – he’s ostensibly a professor of archaeology.

Fans of the movie will immediately grasp what she means. I would say spoiler alert, but after forty years I think that should be unnecessary. In the movie, the Nazis are chasing after the Ark of the Covenant, the chest the ancient Israelites built to hold the pieces of the stone table Moses brought down from Sinai with the Lord’s great commandments. They believe that the ark holds supernatural powers they can harness in their quest for world domination. The movie has lots of ins and outs, chases, fight scenes, romance, and intrigue. In the end, the Nazis wind up with the ark but, when they open it, the power of God destroys them. If Indy stayed home, they would have found the ark, opened it and been destroyed anyway. The character Amy calls it a story problem. I call it the moral of the story.

I think that’s the underlying message of the entire movie. If the ark is just another historic artifact, then there’s no risk if it falls into the wrong hands. If it has supernatural powers, they come from the God of Israel. If he is real, then he is a God of justice and a God who has a special relationship with the Jewish people. He would not make a box that evil men could use to force him to do unjust things to God’s people. Indy spends the entire movie trying to protect God. The message of the movie is that God can protect their self. They make that clear early on. The Nazis place the ark in a crate marked with a Swastika, but the power of God burns it off. God can take care of God’s self. The movie puts this in a globe-trotting adventure, but the same issue replays over and over in the local church.

We are called to boldly share a witness of the risen Christ. However, we often display a great deal of fear and uncertainty. We think about sharing our faith with a neighbor, but we hesitate. People often say, “I’m not well-spoken, pastor. What if I get it wrong. What if my neighbor makes fun of me?” We are called to open the church doors ever wider. Yet, there are always voices in the church that say, “we don’t want to let the wrong sort in. What if they break something? What if they’re too noisy? What if they’re just here for the food!”

It reminds me of a moment of pastoral protest from my friend Rev. Michael. His church had a sudden influx of families with young children. Instead of joy, the church met this change with fear and frustration. Their hymnals had those little page markers in them and some of the children had kept their hands busy during the service braiding some of them. One church member stood up on Sunday morning and scolded the parents saying don’t let your kids braid those bookmarks! So, that Monday, Michael and the ministry team came in and prayed in the sanctuary while they braided every single one!

We can treat our witness, our worship, and above all our space as something we need to protect from outsiders. We have a natural inclination to cherish what is holy, but sometimes we forget we are called to share it not hide it under a bushel basket. Sometimes we forget that God doesn't need our protection. So, a big part of my ministry is always inspiring the church to be bold in its witness and share rather than defend the Lord.

It makes me think of our first scripture reading today. I chose Psalm 46 because it is my favorite scripture. In a relatively short span of text, it offers a series of very compelling images of God's power and protection. It begins by declaring that God is our refuge and an ever-present help in times of trouble. That reminds us that God shelters us, we don't shelter God. The psalmist says we need not fear even if the mountains should crumble to the sea. Doesn't that just make you want to sing!

The psalmist declares that there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. This reminds us that God is a provider. We take on the challenge of ministry in the world not with an attitude of scarcity but with an attitude of abundance. God provides all that we need to serve the mission. Instead of worrying that too many people might show up to the church picnic, we should remember that God will show up to the church picnic. That should be plenty.

The psalmist reminds us of God's power over the nations. Kingdoms rise and fall. There are wars and conflicts. Yet, above the tumult, God's power remains undiminished. It is that voice that declares, "be still and know that I am God." We do ministry in God's name. We don't need to hide behind the church walls, close ourselves off, and diminish ourselves into a museum meant only to protect and preserve the past. We go out into the world with the confidence that comes from being children of that very God. It's at the very heart of what it means to be a United Methodist.

Sometimes, I get questions about the United Methodist theology about communion. We practice open communion in this church meaning we invite all who repent of their sin and seek a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ to come and eat at His table. You don't have to be a member. You don't have to take a class. You don't have to be a certain age. And we do not check. We trust you to search your own heart and do what's right. As I told Greensburg two Sundays ago, we are not God's bouncers. We are God's servers.

A Catholic friend once asked me about this theology. He said, "aren't you worried that someone with impure motives will take communion? What if someone is rolling their eyes, crossing their fingers, mocking it the whole time. What if you give someone the host and they don't treat it with respect?" I have to admit I indulged in a little sarcasm. I said, "wouldn't it be terrible if Christ's body was handed over to sinners to be mocked, abused, and crucified? That's never happened before!" Of course it has. Our whole faith is built on that moment. One message of the cross is that God cannot be mocked. Humanity's worst just isn't bad enough to overcome Jesus' best.

We see that in our other scripture reading for this Sunday. In Hebrews we read, "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." They tried to shame him with a criminal's death. Jesus' devotion to God and faith in the resurrection turned that tragedy into his triumph. How can we, who follow Jesus, live in fear of derision? The text goes on, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Open the doors wider. Welcome in the stranger. Give with an attitude of abundance. As the kids say, tune out the haters.

I began this sermon talking about a story problem, but it's not the one you think. Indy spends the whole movie protecting God only to find that God doesn't need our protection. The

story problem in the church is a little different. There is a natural tendency to cherish and respect what is holy, but when we let that tendency get out of hand, we lose sight of our place in the story. We sometimes forget that we are not the main character. We don't shelter God. God shelters us. We don't protect what is holy. What is holy protects us. We do not guard, we serve. We carry our witness boldly and welcome strangers warmly because of the confidence we have in God.

This is my first Sunday here. I hope it is the first of many. As we minister together through the years to come, let's make this promise. We'll keep each other honest. When we see the attitudes of fear and scarcity creeping in, we can remind each other of the God we serve. When we try to make ourselves the main character, we can remind each other who is the author and perfecter of this faith. Instead of a story problem, it's a story promise. We can live this story together with each other. We can live it with its author. It's a story I can't wait to see. **Amen.**