

“In the City for Good”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
October 28, 2007  
Scripture: Psalm 46

Some people are scared of cities. “They are too noisy,” some say. “All those one way streets are confusing,” say others. “Where do you park?” “Is it safe?” You probably know some people like that, who avoid the city whenever possible. Sometimes religion gets contrasted with the hustle-bustle of the city. Sanctuaries are thought to provide quiet space for reflection. I was recently given one of those coffee table kinds of books featuring pictures of Minnesota churches. Each page with a different church, but as I turned the pages, most pictured small white clapboard rural churches. A lot of them were blanketed in beautiful deep snow. Very beautiful. As I looked at those pictures, I could imagine being able to hear a pin drop. That, apparently, is the ideal Minnesota church.

But I love it when the weather allows us to worship with the large front doors thrown open. I love it when our music drifts out into the street, and the noise of buses and the occasional siren from the fire station around the corner come in. Even better when it is marathon weekend and people are walking up and down Cedar Street. “God is in the midst of the city” the Psalmist proclaims.

As fitting as it is for us, when this Psalm was first written, it was not written about Saint Paul. It is a song of Zion, a psalm that describes the importance and meaning of Jerusalem in God’s relation to people.<sup>1</sup> Psalm 46 is not a song about an impregnable city of God, a metropolis of security founded in the world to exempt its inhabitants from the dangers of history. The point is not that all is calm and serene. The point is that for Zion, the true subject is not the city but the God who chooses to dwell in the midst of the city.<sup>2</sup>

Little Jerusalem, proud capitol city, but tossed and turned by change caused by threats of nature and enemy nations. Little Jerusalem could stand tall as this Psalm was said,

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, 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. . . God is in the midst of the city. (Ps 46:1-3)

Over and over, despite the threats, the Psalmist affirms a faith that is stronger.

Our times are not that different. With fires raging across California causing evacuations not just up in the mountains, but in major cities, and water shortages threatening Atlanta and a bridge collapsing in Minneapolis, we too live in a time of shaking of foundations as the earth changes and the mountains shake.

Mayor Coleman and I agreed to reflect on this Psalm in light of history and future, the past and present challenges facing the city and the church. He spoke about some of the challenges we must overcome in Saint Paul.

The church, likewise, has challenges that confront us. Challenges that will define our identity in these coming years. Challenges that will feel to some as if the mountains are trembling and the seas are quaking. John Buchanan, writing a decade ago,

We live in a critical time for the churches. Enormous and significant cultural change has occurred in the religious situation making it very different from what many of us experienced in the past. Our churches have declined numerically and also in terms of public influence. In many American cities and communities, once thriving congregations have seen membership decline, buildings age and become more demanding to maintain, budgets tighten, and mission reduced to institutional survival.<sup>3</sup>

All those things were present here at Central. The church is always just one generation from extinction, it has been said. Well, Central was at that breaking point. Now we still have lots of seats here in this sanctuary that are available. But membership declines and low morale had led to many Sundays in which just fifty or sixty people were here in worship. It was a crisis point. In 2005, I was called here to help this church live or die with courage and grace.

A month or so after my arrival, the former Mayor, not the current Mayor who is here today, the former Mayor, came into my office. “Why don’t you just close,” he said to me. “And nice to meet you,” I thought. “The city could really use this space for performing arts. You could merge with another church and come back here once a year or so for a history Sunday.” Then again, “the city could really use this space for performances.” I said, “Thanks, but we have other plans.” What I should have said was, “what this city really needs is a healthy church.”

As our world is rapidly changing, we find ourselves, members, friends, visitors, here at Central Presbyterian Church at the crossroad of many of these changes. Here we are, on the corner of Cedar and Exchange Streets, between a major media outlet and the Capitol; between Garrison Keillor’s imaginative Lake Wobegon and the all too real world for those seeking the services of the Union Gospel Mission. Between low-income housing and high-rise condominiums. We find ourselves right here in the middle. In the city.

And we are in the city for good. In a few days, we will convert our dining room into a temporary shelter for homeless children and their parents. Offering hospitality to those who feel like the mountains have trembled and the waters are roaring. Offering welcome and through our presence an assurance that God is still in the midst of the city.

Our classrooms are used to teach new immigrants English, and the volunteer teachers and the students and their children form bonds that create community. This Tuesday night they will be having a dance party. I cannot think of a better kind of event that we could host to offer our welcome and use our space.

Every Wednesday, we host a community lunch. More than one hundred and fifty people gather here for the great healthy food. Workers from the Science Museum and MPR and state

and city employees come for lunch with their colleagues. Retired neighbors come in search of community. We invite those who cannot afford even our small requested donation to come as our guests. And people come and sit around these big round tables, breaking bread and talking and strengthening ties to the larger community.

Healthy churches are more than just individuals coming together. City churches bring together an enormous variety of people who might never choose to be in the same place. We come as individuals: rich and poor, young and old, black and white, gay and straight, those who walk here and those who drive great distances to come. We come as individuals, but leave with our hearts and minds impacted by those we have met. We come as individuals, but leave knowing that we are part of a larger community.

The banner out front claims that we are “in the city for good.” Psalm 46 says that “God is in the midst of the city.” And if God is here, then we have a lot of work to do. It is time to sign up to take a shift and offer hospitality to homeless children and their parents. It is time to help new immigrants feel welcomed and equipped for a full life in St. Paul. It is time to welcome young adults new to the city, and remind that life is about more than hard work. It is time to welcome empty nesters, who have moved downtown to get connected with opportunities to grow and learn and serve.

“God is in the midst of the city,” the Psalmist shouts. In the city for good. And the church must help point the way.

I have told this story before, but like all good stories it is worth hearing again. It’s told by Anne Lamott in her book Traveling Mercies. It’s a story about a seven year old girl, who got lost in her city.

The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn’t find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and he drove around until finally she saw her church. She point it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, “You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.”<sup>4</sup>

God is in the midst of the city and we are in the city for good. And if that is the case, we have some work to do in this church and in the city. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> James Mays, Psalms in the Interpretation Commentary series (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994) 182.

<sup>2</sup> Mays, 185.

<sup>3</sup> John Buchanan, Being Church, Becoming Community (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) 24.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999) 55.