

Our refuge and strength is...

By [James Sledge](#)

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*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. Psalm 46:1-3*

We will not fear even if the very foundations of the earth are shaken. So says the psalmist. Rarely do I live as though it were true. I wonder how many people do. I wonder if the psalmist did. Was that poet a person of rare faith? Or did she write these words in one of those rare moments when faith feels sure and certain? Or did he simply churn out a hymn that said the right words without really believing them himself? (Perhaps you've seen those articles about atheist pastors who continue to serve congregations and preach sermons calling people to faith.)

I'm no atheist, but I have a long list of fears and anxieties. In many Presbyterian and other mainline congregations, fear and anxiety are pervasive: fear of not meeting the budget, fear of losing members and wasting away, fear that conflicts within congregation or denomination could rip things apart. The list goes on—and as the surrounding culture seems to be fleeing traditional churches in ever increasing numbers, the anxiety increases.

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The institutional church faces real threats. Attending seminary is a much riskier proposition than it was when I enrolled some 20 years ago. Small churches are closing and larger churches are calling fewer pastors. There are many more people looking for church positions than there are positions. Of course many people who

work outside the church, in the "real world," have dealt with this for decades. But at least in the church, shouldn't we be less afraid, less anxious?

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We will not fear because of God. God... I wonder if some of our fear and anxiety, especially in the church, comes from getting this mixed up. Speaking of us pastors, we have often counted on the church or the denomination to provide for us, to have good positions with good health care and pensions. But the church isn't God, and if the church is our refuge and strength, no wonder we are caught up in fear and anxiety. We've put our trust in an idol.

We pastors sometimes trust in our own abilities, in those seminary educations we received and our (presumed) stellar preaching skills. When things don't go well we attend seminars and conferences to improve our skill set. Then if things still don't get better, we may be filled with self-doubt, we may blame the congregation, or we may do some of each.

Congregations often do something similar. They have many gifted and skilled lay leaders and volunteers who know how to be successful. But when things don't go well they may bring in an expert consultant or hire a new pastor. Then if things still don't get better, they may be filled with self-doubt, they may blame the pastor, or they make do some of each.

But neither the pastor's nor the congregation's gifts and intelligence and abilities are God, and so when we put our trust in such things, when they become our refuge and strength, no wonder we end up in fear and anxiety. We have put our trust in idols.

Perhaps this pattern becomes more inevitable the more institutional faith becomes. When church becomes more about buildings and worship styles than following Jesus, we are bound to stumble. Maybe the travails facing many congregations these days are wakeup calls from God, invitations to refocus our trust on something other than institutional things or human skills.

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God... Dare we let God/Christ become the very center, the very core? Dare we trust in the way Jesus calls us to walk over the ways of the world, over our own logic or intelligence, over our own skills and abilities, over the images of God we create for ourselves that have all the same opinions and biases we have?

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God... Not us, not the church, but God. I wonder if I can do that.

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