

Psalm 46

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.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

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

Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

‘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.

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’

Benediction

Calm us, Lord, as you calm the storms.
Still us, Lord. Keep us from harm.
Let all the tumult within us cease;
Enfold us, Lord, in your peace.¹
Amen.

Children’s Time

A reflection on St. Catherine of Siena’s *Interior Castle*. In a summary, there is an interior castle within where we might find refuge, guidance, and peace.

¹ The text for “Calm me, Lord” is from *Sing the Story #45*.

I have entitled this sermon “Fall 2020” because we are entering a season that is to me unique. In my near 25 years of ministry I have never been with a congregation and community as we seek to re-open while navigating a pandemic. In a staff meeting back in August Susanne and I were considering this reality and the congregational care issues wrapped up in it. We were both aware of Psalm 46:10 and the invitation God offers to “be still and know that I am God”. We were both aware of a prayer practice offered by Fr. Richard Rohr which has the capacity to stable us amidst unruly seas. Stillness, calm alongside God, amidst turbulence—this is a gift offered through our Christian scriptures and spirituality which is available to families, to a congregation, to society. The price is a good one—all it takes is an investment in time. Unruly winds and rough waters seem to be the landscape for Fall 2020 and likely the winter months. At least those are the apprehensions which we have heard in conversations we are having.

Teachers have returned to classrooms with students arriving this coming week, and more than a few are worried. Social distancing is a concern. The transmission of that brought to school by students or other staff is a concern. It is a concern that those microscopic transmissions we receive are then returned to our bubbles. Underlying health issues of students or staff, or simple age of teachers themselves, is a concern.

Some parents are worried as well, so I hear. These are a few parents who absolutely need the school system to take their children for the day because of their work schedule. There are a few parents who do not fully trust classroom conditions to which their children would be returning. And then there are the parents who are trying to figure out how to effectively home-school or if they can afford to home school.

Businesses also have their worries. Establishments like Little Bird and the German Club (ach du Liebe Zeit!) have closed on account of unsustainable revenue in a pandemic season, and tragically more may follow. The owners of these businesses and their former employees face uncertainty in these days. The wait staff of businesses still operating also face health and financial concerns as we limp towards a quasi normal. Employees who have been doing company business at home are being required to return to the office, and this causes some anxiety.

Pastors, like me, are concerned because I do not know what these next eight months will look like. Much of the programming to which we have previously given oversight is not continuing or significantly modified. Much of the congregational care once offered to each other in worship, social events or study times is greatly reduced at this time. We are needing to reinvent our ministry every month, it seems, and we do not know if or what we try will facilitate the Spirit’s work.

Aware of these sentiments Susanne and I were drawn to a spiritual exercise based on Psalm 46:10 offered by Franciscan Priest, Fr. Richard Rohr. I first encountered this practice several years back at a session of contemplative prayer, and now it has been publicized through a web-site (the citation of the page can be found on the hard copy and posted editions of my sermon). We will try this exercise together, and then I will offer a personal example or two of the ways it has aided me in these last weeks. I will then conclude with a few remarks about Psalm 46.

As I mentioned, the text of this spiritual tool comes from Psalm 46:10 of the Hebrew Scriptures: “Be still and know that I am God.”

Gently close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. We will pray the Psalm in five consecutively diminishing sentences. I like to take a least three deep breaths as we transition from phrase to phrase, but each of us has personal preference. I will lead us in these phrases coming from Psalm 46:10; and invite you to repeat them to yourself, meditate on them, or speak them quietly aloud. Settle yourselves and gain an awareness of the ground beneath you and the breath within you. Close your eyes if this is helpful. And so we begin.

Be still and know that I am God. [three long breaths]

Be still and know that I am. [three long breaths]

Be still and know. [three long breaths]

Be still. [three long breaths]

Be. [three long breaths]

Amen²

A little over a week ago I was in one of our city’s medi-clinics having some stitches removed. The story behind the stitches is worthy of camp fire lore, but not worship. The upshot is that my head is recovering better than my pride. Even though I had an appointment for a specific time, but I was not an urgent case; so I had a good long while to sit and reflect on all manner of things. I must say that I had no anger toward a system which was prioritizing other patients ahead of me based on the acuity of their conditions. I was, and continue to be, grateful for a health system in which all receive a base level of care at an affordable price (unlike the situation in my Old Country). Still, I found myself waiting and trying to be still, and attentive, and patient. I looked around the waiting room to see most everyone on their phones checking messages, replying to messages, reading a blog post, or otherwise distracting themselves from their wait. The practice of Psalm 46 came to mind, and I began to move through it. To be honest it was an amazing

² <https://gravitycenter.com/practice/be-still/>

30 minutes regaining a grasp upon the center of my being. It was good medicine even before I saw the physician.

And then I became aware of two people speaking a distinctively different language than French or English. After a few minutes she went to her appointment and I went to over to him. After a very generic exchange of pleasantries we visited. He was born in Iran and last year completed his PhD studies in Saskatoon. Sadly, there are no jobs in his area right now. We talked about the challenges of living into an occupation in these days, of being a newcomer at this time, of being away from extended family. I think I was better able to listen and be present with him on account of my thirty minutes with Psalm 46:10. I wonder if my Farsi speaking friend would also benefit from this practice. I suspect most of we humans crave being still and resting in trust.

Earlier this week I awoke far too soon. Those who know me know I am an early riser, but that morning it was ridiculous. It was so early, in fact, that I actually tried lying in bed to see if I might fall asleep again. Futility. Not ready to go ambling in the dark at that hour I found myself drawn to Psalm 46:10. It did not return me to sleep as I had hoped, but by the time I made it out into the weak rays of the approaching dawn for my walk I almost felt rested.

How many of us and our community are in the nervous waiting rooms of life just trying to ease the tension with all that our cell phones can offer? Meanwhile, the anxieties remain unattended, and awareness to those around us is diminished, and mindfulness of our own condition goes unattended. How many of us and our community lie awake at night tormented by life's concerns or the weather patterns unaware of any positive response to the insomnia? Now, more than ever I think, we are invited to reclaim the spirituality of our tradition and the grounding habits of our forbearers.

Psalm 46 is a Psalm bearing witness to a trust in the God of our ancestors regardless the conditions out there. Our Scripture text from Mark affirms that Jesus has authority and power and willingness to calm the storms of the seas-- which in ancient near east mythology would be the forces of chaos. Further to this, the business of earth changing and mountains shaking and waters roaring and foaming and the earth melting which we hear about in Psalm 46—all those are phrases which would have conjured up for the ancients images of the pre-creation chaos³. Even when chaos threatens to overrun God's people, Psalm 46 and Mark 4 remind us that God will help us, that God is with us, that God is our hope. When we feel chaos descending upon us once more, these texts remind us that we can

³ Robert Bratcher and William Reburn, *A Handbook on Psalms*—a part of the UBS Handbook Series, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), pp 431-433.

take refuge in the God who predates us and the Christ with us and the God who goes before us.

I had planned to say more about Psalm 46, but after re-working my sermon two weeks ago Patty told me I use too many words and generally preach too long. With my ego at low ebb and it being the long weekend, I acquiesce to her sentiments. Before I wrap up this sermon, however, I offer one textual note about verses 8-10 which I think are pertinent. There are strong allusions in this section to God's peace which triumphs over the wars and conflicts that rage. In fact, a very valid (and probably more accurate) translation of "be still" in 46:10 is "stop fighting".⁴

Can we stop fighting?? Can we stop fighting against ourselves, against our neighbour, against our rival political party, against those not like us??? Psalm 46 is a clarion call to make peace on the basis God's peace. We are not meant to be lesser gods who keep wars raging. There is one true God to whom we and the nations are invited to submit. This is not a peace devoid of justice. As Jesus Christ and others have demonstrated, it is a just peace made through non-violent engagement. Non-violence with ourselves, with our housemates, with our classrooms, with injustices in our world. And that is where I will pick up my sermonizing in two weeks.

For today, however, please remember that whatever the emotional condition you or your loved ones find yourselves in, there is a God who is reigns in the chaos. Remember that regardless your health crises or sleeplessness, there is a God who is a very present help in all trouble. Remember that the God we worship invites us to cease the struggles which drain our resources and lives. Be still, stop fighting, and know that the LORD is God. Amen.

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⁴ Ibid, 434.

Children's Time