

Children's Time

Angels on water: Dave & Marlene's Epic Boat Ride across the Cook Straight in NZ:

- Ferry ride starts well enough and the happy couple gets drinks and settles in
- Then the weather broke loose: massive waves, wind, rain, etc...
- Dave looks out the window—45 degrees; Dave looks down at his drink, empty
- Marlene is beginning to feel sick; then a woman comes over and faces her
- Look into my eyes and we will keep talking; we will move into the inner part of the ship, but keep looking at me and we will keep talking
- Dave stayed by the windows to watch the action outside
- 90% of the passengers got sick; 2 stewards left standing; Dave & Marlene not sick

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.

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Opening Prayer:

For this sermon's opening prayer, we will pray together Psalm 46:10 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: 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]

Amen¹

Today we enter week four in our sermon series on “Be Still and Know That I Am God”. In the sermon series we have been working backwards in the verse following the prayer practice just employed, and that means today I will be exploring the concept of stillness and knowing. How we learn to know is an intriguing topic for Christian discipleship as well as family systems.

How do we learn to know anything?? Consider this for a moment. What is something you have learned and how did you come to know it?? In my high school the foreign language option was German. My parents both only spoke dialects of German prior to enrolling in the English school system, and having endured this hardship they decided to only speak English to their children. I was a Teutonic descendant with no knowledge of German, so I thought learning German was a grand idea. I studied hard, conjugated well, did stellar in my classes and tested out of the foreign language requirements at my university. Theoretically, I knew the German language. And then I spent a year in Germany. Those first months were a cruel and helpful lesson in what it really means to know something. Eventually I did come to know a bit of the German language, but it didn't happen through book study. Experience, I am coming to believe, is one significant way we learn to know. Experience, let us consider this....

When we started this little sermon series on Psalm 46:10 I was struck by the number of people who shared with me the place this Psalm has had in their lives. It became important through a habit of dwelling with Psalm 46. The accounts I will share are from real people who have worshipped alongside us. I will intersperse my theological reflections this day on “learning to know” with these

¹ <https://gravitycenter.com/practice/be-still/>

personal experiences of dwelling in Psalm 46. The first comes from the Driedgers of Grassy Plains Farm whom we know as Donna & Irvin. Donna wrote,

When Irvin had his stroke on April 10, 2011 the prognosis was very grim. When we were moved into the Rehab Ward at City Hospital, we developed some simple routines at bedtime. When he was prepped for [evening] and as soon as the nurse left the room I would climb into bed and snuggle with him — then I would say Psalm 23 to him— then pause and add Psalm 46:10 —“Be still and know that I am God”. Then I would sing “Children of the Heavenly Father “. He would fall asleep peacefully and I could kiss him goodnight as I left.

We continue with the Psalm 23 & 46:10 to this day. We both seem to find comfort and solace in these scripture passages. I asked him if it was O. K. for you to use some of this in your sermon — He smiled broadly and said” YES” emphatically. THE JOURNEY CONTINUES. [end quote]

Let us reflect briefly upon our text from Matthew 14. What exactly was Peter thinking stepping out onto the “storm vexed sea” (to use the compelling imagery of our hymn)? “The sea”, in the Ancient Near East mythology informing our Hebrew scriptures is often an allusion to the god Yam; and Yam is more about chaos and destruction than anything. The wind, as well, would have been among the pantheon of gods to whom many made grain sacrifices so that their boats and crops would not get battered. Peter steps out of the boat (and the boat was an early Christian metaphor for the church) at first confident of walking on water. And he does! And then he doesn't. He does not know what will come from stepping out, but he learns. Stepping out of the boat and sinking, perhaps, was part of his spiritual formation.

In this COVID-19 season it feels as if we are being repeatedly asked to try something new, to step out of the boat, to walk on some kind of chaotic water—not just pastoral staff but all of us. The responsibilities of business owners, employees, teachers, students, administrators, medical staff, health region patients, parents, grand-parents, and plain old citizens has changed. New things are being asked of us. It often feels as if turbulent and contrary winds are all around us. We see Jesus out there ahead of us, so we step out trusting in something greater than us. And then we begin sinking. Most of us these days do not know how to navigate the roiling waters or the raging winds or the other challenges of this COVID-19 world. If we are honest with ourselves, most of us do not know our way out of these seas. The Biblical account has more, but now it is time for another real-life reflection on Psalm 46.

Some years ago, I was given homework to complete in time for my Christian Peacemaker Teams training. The task was to memorize a passage of scripture, a poem, or some other reading that one could derive meaning, comfort, and

strength from during difficult times. This preparation makes a whole lot of sense since signing up to work as a human rights defender is to intentionally sign up for difficult times. I chose Psalm 46 for my homework, not knowing at the time how much I would need it as well as other scriptures and readings during my full time work in Palestine.

It was during my third stint that this Psalm became one of my creatures of comforts and strengths. Autumn of 2015 was a horrifying time. Beginning on the 23 of Sept and lasting until the 7 of Nov, we were plunged into extreme daily violence and daily death tolls - almost disproportionately the victims were Palestinian teenagers. How does one make sense of anything in the midst of pointless violence and death? How does one maintain hope and sanity when grief and fear permeates daily existence in even greater ways than previously known? A person could cope in many ways and via many means during such times. My one and only teammate and I drank a lot of tea and ate a lot of mixed nuts. We grasped the hands of our kindergarten friends more tightly as we walked them to school. We developed a new sense of humour. We gave and received support from our community. And I remembered and hung onto Psalm 46. Therefore we will not fear, though it feels as if the world is imploding; we will not fear in the midst of tear gas clouds and sound bomb explosions. God tears down walls; God will dismantle oppression and occupation. Violence and death do not have the final say. The way things are is not the way things have to be. Shalom is coming. Be still and know.

I return to the story out of Matthew 14 in relation to Psalm 46. In my last sentiments on the text I suggested that most of us do not know our way out of these troubled waters and maybe have a feeling of going down. The beauty of this biblical story is that we do not need to know how to manage the chaos. Like Peter, we see Jesus who has gone before us into the choppy waters. Like Peter, we are drawn to join Jesus out there. And like Peter, we even sometimes walk on water. And like Peter, we often times begin to sink. Then a hand reaches out to us and we are raised once more. The winds cease. The waters calm. We recognize once more that we follow one greater than us. We will not always know how to navigate the difficulties of lives or this world, but we trust in the One who has gone before us into the storm and proves faithful in assisting us as we walk on water and also succumb to the tempest. More important than we knowing how to get through the storm is the reality that the One who has gone before us knows a way through.

So much sermonizing..... I know. It seems the one task at which I do not completely fail, so I must go with it. One last personal reflection on Psalm 46 and then I will conclude. These brief remarks come from Lynn Driedger.

The "Be still" mantra brings back many fond memories. It was introduced to the NPMC deacon board at a Shekinah board retreat about 15 years ago, by guest speaker Ron Evans. After the session, we were sent out to find a quiet and private place, and do the mantra on our own; I found the high spot near where the tipi is / was situated. The instructions from Ron Evans were to sit quietly and comfortably, while breathing deeply. Visualizing the Spirit entering me on an inhalation, and then going forth into the world on an exhalation, helped me become quiet. As each sequence of a deep breath and spoken line was repeated, and as I moved from one line to the next, my mind was gradually cleared of other thoughts, only to be replaced with a revelation of God's presence. At the end, my inner self was refilled with the presence of God's Spirit, and I felt rejuvenated and strengthened for what the rest of the day would bring. Over the next year or so, I often used it as my morning meditation.

As Lynn's reflection suggests, practice may be one additional way we learn to know. In his 2008 book *Outliers*, Malcom Gladwell contended that 10,000 hours of practice at most disciplines will lead to a proficiency at that discipline; it is a theory to which I am drawn and also one up for discussion in the academic world.² Early Anabaptist theologian and spiritualist Hans Denck is quoted as saying, "No one can truly know Christ unless they follow him in life";³ a sentiment echoed by other early Mennonite leaders.⁴ These thoughts are only a restatement of something Jesus himself said: "follow me", and "if any want to become my disciples...follow me". It is true that we listen to Jesus and we behold the works of Jesus, but we most fully live into our Christian identity when we are following Jesus. We come to know the Christ as we imitate the Christ. Sometimes this will mean joining Jesus on "the mountain" to pray in solitude—often time on "the mountain" in prayer prepares us for the chaos. Following Jesus will also mean stepping out into the chaos to join the Christ. If we want to "be still and **know**—that Yahweh is God", we will need to find ways of practicing stillness and being reminded that Yahweh is God. If we want to "be still and **know**—that Yahweh is God", we will need to find the courage to trust as we move out into the troubled waters. If we begin sinking, let us take heart in remembering there will be one reaching out a hand to raise us up once more. And this is very Good News; it is the gospel. Amen.

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² A web search of the 10,000 hour principal yields a variety of responses to Gladwell's proposition.

³ <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1022180>

⁴ See, for example, reflections by Hans Hut in J. Craig Hass' *Readings from Mennonite Writings, New and Old* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1992), p. 274.

