

Children's Time

The Interior Room—Catherine of Sienna

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Scripture Readings

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.

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Deuteronomy 6:4-6, 14-15a

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a God.

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Benediction

Gracious God, bless us as we still ourselves before you. Tenacious God, bless us as we extend ourselves for you and the goodness you would hope for this world. Compassionate God, wrap us in your tender care as we offer ourselves to you each week, each day and each hour. Amen.

Today we enter week two in our sermon series on “Be Still and Know That I Am God”. In the sermon series we will be working backwards in the verse following the prayer practice employed earlier, and that means I will be exploring the concept of stillness in relation to God. Being still in the presence of God may entail solitude or times of personal reflection. Stillness before God, however, does not imply inactivity. Jesus was still before God and yet quite engaged with his social setting. He was still before God and yet spoke in ways that disturbed the religious and civic powers of the day. I am mindful of this as I consider protests in Belarus, in the States (Portland and elsewhere), at our Provincial capitol (Tristen Durocher).

Our image of God, I believe, will determine the manner in which we translate our stillness before God into action. There are many religious zealots these days—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Indigenous, and even the atheist I would suggest—who convert their stillness before God into violence. Their stillness before God emboldens them to do terrible things to individuals and nations. This has roots in the gods before whom they have become still. Jesus followed a differed God; and he did not do terrible things to individuals or nations. He read and heard many of the same violent texts which we have read and heard, and yet his intimacy with God led him down a different path. This Jesus path is one to which Mennonites have historically committed themselves. Still, and dwelling in the God of Jesus, and active—that is the focus for my reflections today.

You may not know the name Howard Thurman, but we all should; that is where I begin. Lest we think grand-parents make no difference, Thurman’s story begins with Oma Nancy Ambrose. Nancy Ambrose was raised as a slave in Florida prior to the abolishment of slavery in the States mid 1860s. From the periodic preacher allowed onto the plantation Nancy gathered that they were not slaves, but were beloved children of God. Nancy owned that truth and taught it to her children and grandchildren. She influenced her grandson Howard Thurman to believe in his inherent worth as God’s child despite the racism he experienced growing up in “Jim Crow” Florida. Thurman became the spiritual architect for the non-violent wing of the Civil Rights movement. His story is a reflection of strength which comes with stilling ourselves and trusting that the Lord is a God who dispenses with violence.

As a youngster Thurman would spend time alone sitting in an oak tree in the backyard. His biographers detail the beautiful image of Howard having extensive conversations with this oak tree. The majestic oak would hold all his hopes, all his concerns, all his inspiration, all the silence, all those things that contributed to and confounded his confidence in stepping into his potential. His time alone with

God in nature via the oak tree, and the lessons of his grandmother, and the liberating stories of the bible enabled him to become the first African-American to graduate from the eighth grade in Daytona Beach; and the first African American to go to a Quaker seminary; and the first African American dean of Boston University.<sup>1</sup>

Maybe it was the oak tree experience or possibly life among the Quakers, but as a pastor Thurman began including times of silence in worship. This is not what we imagine when we consider African American worship. His contemplative disposition, however, was part and parcel of a vision in which racial reconciliation might actually come to be.

In his various roles he formed an inter-racial choir, a student exchange between a black women's college (Spellman) and a white women's college (Vassar). He helped co-found The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples as the U.S's first interracial interfaith congregation<sup>2</sup>--interfaith and interracial! This initiative is no doubt directly linked to his time spent in India with its religiously pluralistic setting. Mohatma Ghandi and other Indian leaders invited Thurman to come to India for an inter-racial conversation between American Blacks and Indians who were each dealing with systemic racism and moral responses to unjust systems. Ghandi even asked him how he could possibly be a Christian when slave owners and the Klu Klux Klan also called themselves Christian. Thurman had a clear sense that "the religion of Jesus" was also was the natural religion of the oppressed".<sup>3</sup> Ghandi told Thurman that American Negroes would teach non-violence as social change to Christianity and the world.

In 1949 Thurman formalized these sentiments in his book called *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which drew parallels between the life of Jesus as a poor Jew in an oppressive Roman Empire to the experience of poor blacks in America. He said Jesus knew their experience intimately and knew their suffering. And because Jesus knew their suffering, Jesus valued them as followers and wanted them to walk in his way of non-violence and non-vengeance.

Martin Luther King, Jr., became a student in Thurman's classes and they formed a friendship. Thurman stressed to King that the non-violence of Jesus must be cultivated into the civil rights movement. Why they marched and how they marched and what they did after the marches was as important as the marches themselves. They must worship God before a march and become grounded in the transcendent experience of God and Christ. Thurman insisted that non-violence was a moral and ethical lifestyle not just a protest tactic. Social issues of injustice

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Doblmaier, *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story*—a film documentary from *Journey Films* appearing on PBS in 2019 (1413 King Street, Alexandria VA 22314 ♦ 703.519.8200 ♦ [www.journeyfilms.com](http://www.journeyfilms.com)).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fellowshipsf.org>

<sup>3</sup> <http://journeyfilms.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Backs-Against-the-Wall-Press-Release-Final.pdf>

were temporary and brief but our relationship as God's people was of utmost importance. He said that as shapers of American religion and justice, they must go deeper into contemplation of God's character and justice.

It may be of interest to know that Howard Thurman himself did not march or protest. He was criticized for that choice, but he did not feel it was his calling. He stilled himself and remembered that the Lord is God. Maybe surprisingly, the non-violent civil rights leaders came to him for teaching and encouragement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. carried Thurman's book *Jesus and the disinherited* in his pocket until his death.

So, then, we are to the discipleship of the text and the story for us.

The first act of discipleship I am highlighting today is one of theological inventory. Theology shapes action. When we invoke and rest in God, which God are invoking and resting in? With this in mind I would invite us dwell in an understanding of God shown us by Jesus Christ. The God of Psalm 46 is different than the nations and their gods which are in an uproar; and Deuteronomy 6 states that there are other gods. We must decide which gods or God to follow; it is our choice. Jesus lives into a vision of God portrayed in Psalm 46 in which instruments of war are broken and instruments of defense burned. We need people protesting for human rights, but not rioting. We need family members insisting upon domestic respect, but not passive-aggressively acting out. We need public officials grounded in the God of Jesus inviting us—victims and perpetrators—to a new life in which we might make a new start. Theology, our concept or understanding of God—our guiding principle—makes a difference.

Secondly, I am curious what the oak tree of Howard Thurman might look like for each of us. I amble along the river most mornings and even sometimes in the late afternoon. The river is my oak tree into which I can pour my hopes, my griefs, my joys and find a benevolent presence to hold me and float me past myself. To be still we all need an oak tree, a river, a spiritual director, a dear friend, a grounding practice, an interior room, a mantra, something. Consider what this might be for you, and if you do not have such a source of stillness a conversation with one of the pastoral staff would be welcome to explore options.

Finally, for today, I think our theology and our stillness before God are not meant to be treasures which we hoard. In some way or form we are invited to translate this nobleness into compassionate engagement with the world. This may be something as simple as being a positive presence in the home or at work. This may mean intentionally knitting prayer shawls for the ailing or toques for the newborns. This might mean joining a disenfranchised group on a walk into the teeth of attack dogs. This might mean, for some like Jesus, a way of tears and maybe even a martyrdom. Or it might mean, as it did for Howard Thurman, not

marching but supporting those striving for mercy, social compassion and a more just society. As part of checking in with people this past week I was taken with a reflection from one of the school staff of our congregation. Susan Ens Funk wrote, I am fortunate to have work. I am fortunate to have mostly good principals and many good colleagues. I am fortunate to have family and friends with whom I am still able to cultivate strong relationships. I am blessed.

I am coming to the conclusion that it may well be our calling to bring joy along with hopefulness and calm into the spaces where we are. I am living into that work.<sup>4</sup>

I do not know what Being Still before the God of Jesus will look like for you or for me or for us. What I do know is that when we are still before the God of Jesus things change for us and our society. Individually, we find a place of calm where the wars within us and outside of us cease. Situating ourselves in the presence of this God, those around us are invited into a place of refuge where the implements of conflict are put aside. Society itself will be drawn to limp towards a greater equity for it's citizens—not based on the colour of one's skin or the X / Y combination in the chromosomes, but on the content of our character. I long for this day. And it might begin with being still before the God of Psalm 46 who is the God of Jesus. Be still. Be still and know. Be still and know I Am. Be still and know I Am God. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

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<sup>4</sup> Email exchange on September 14, 2020.