

Be Still

Psalm 46

November 13, 2022

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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Our theme this year as a whole church is **Being**. We have looked at three being texts so far. Exodus 3—where God announces God’s self as “I AM.” God is being itself. Then Acts 17, in which Paul tells the Athenians (who don’t know God) that God is the one “in whom we live and move and have our being.” Our being is *in* God’s. Then we read Psalm 139, which says that everywhere that we go—everywhere that *we are*, God is there, too.

What I hope you see is how clearly the Scripture says that our being and God’s being are intertwined. Your being, at its core, comes from—is nurture and nourished by—the being of God. To know God’s being—what it is, what it does—is to know your own.

In the new year, we will study the God-being-with-us known as Jesus. But before we do, there’s one last text on “being” from the Hebrew Scriptures I want us to consider. Psalm 46, the text from which we draw the wonderful phrase, “*be still* and know that I am God.” Let’s listen to the whole Psalm, in which the command to “be still” is made in the midst of a world in turmoil.

¹God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; God’s voice is heard, the earth melts.

⁷The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

⁸Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations God has brought on the earth.

⁹God makes wars cease to the end of the earth; God breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; God burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

¹¹The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Be still. What comes to your mind when you hear me say those words? What comes to your mind when you hear God saying those words to you?

For many of you, those words are a long-awaited invitation. They are a door opening into a quiet room, where there is a comfortable chair, a pair of slippers, a cup of coffee steaming on a side table, and a window for you to look out at the slanting light of a late autumn landscape.

“Be still” is an invitation to deliberately remove yourself from the vortex of “must do’s” and to simply be present to your self.

It's a powerful invitation: be still. It's powerful because there is something about the rhythm of daily life—especially for those of us facing the demands of work and raising kids on top of the stresses and anxieties of modern life—that is crazy-making. Daily life doesn't let us be still. Stillness can feel like a guilty pleasure—like we have to steal stillness in order to take it.

We know that stillness is good and right. That it helps us regulate our bodies and spirits. I do hope you find time—all of you in every stage of life—to be still.

Stillness itself doesn't heal us. Taking time to slow down doesn't make it all better.

Some of you have made contemplation and stillness part of your regular spiritual practice. Those of you who have, know that stopping and being still is just one step in the journey. You can stop your body, but your mind keeps moving—the stillness of your body makes it all the more apparent. Try sitting still for a few minutes and just count the thoughts that come into your mind: if you get to 20 thoughts, you're normal. Some of you might even press toward 40 or 50. Our minds, these beautiful meaning-making organs—these lumps of tissue that are the seat of our consciousness and our identity, they are always searching, always trying to find our way out of places of pain, trying to find a way away from threat. We're always assessing the world around us, what people think of us, what we said, what we did, what we must yet do.

With our brains always in motion, being still with your thoughts is uncomfortable. It's why we pick up our devices to much—we're rather let our minds be tickled with games, or social media scrolling that be alone with the vagaries of our frenetic brains.

Ancient wisdom about silence-keeping is full of hard-earned tips and tricks for even the most restless minds. A prayer word to repeat, a focus on the breath, an icon to focus our eyes, or beads to occupy our hands. Even so, those of us who spend hours and years in the practice of stillness rarely “master” it.

So, if we never really “master” stillness, some might ask, in the end, what is the point of being still? Why not just work like a dog? Why not be a slave to compulsion? Why not just be a flawed human animal, flicking through our phone, catastrophizing and flirting with conspiracy theories to manage the chaos. Why not just be anxious and obsessed and fidgety until we die?

Let's look at Psalm 46 again. The Psalm is clear that the world around us is falling apart—or at least the metaphorical language suggests that that's the way it appears. The psalm begins with a focus on chaos in the natural world: mountains shake; sea waters roar and foam. The images are of earthquakes and floods—the earth and sea violently rejecting its human inhabitants. That's not all that's in upheaval in the landscape of Psalm 46—it the rulers of the nations, too, who are the cause of chaos. The nations are in an uproar—the kingdoms totter. The psalm says the violence of our politics feels like an earthquake or a flood—the harm to human well-being caused by a megalomaniacal leader is like that of a natural disaster.

The world feels like it is falling apart. That's the backdrop. But the message of this Psalm is clear that no matter what the world around you feels like, your Being is safe. God is there, when the mountains shake and the politicians shake their fists, and your mind starts racing and catastrophizing. God is our refuge.

Refuge. It's a peculiar word. A refuge is place of protection. A hiding place. It's a place where you feel strong. Martin Luther, in his great hymn about this passage said, "A Mighty Fortress is our God."

There is a place where you are safe. But the place the psalmist describes is not a fortress. It's not a hiding place, with thick walls, a door to lock and bar.

The safe place is... a community. Here, it's called the City of God. In the context of the Scripture writers it's Zion—the city of Jerusalem. But here's where I feel like we're allowed to expand our sense of where this refuge is—where this city, this community, is located. The place of safety, the community of refuge can't be a particular city. After all, the psalmist insists with utter clarity that there's a river whose streams flow through this city and, while I've never been there, there ain't no river in Jerusalem. Like the rest of the psalm, this image of the City of God is an evocative metaphor, ready for us to take it and place it in our own lives. The City of God, I think, is a community where God's life-giving love flows like a river, a community of people where God's compassionate Spirit is felt, a body of human beings where mutual aid and friendship and mercy move between us and connect us to God and to each other.

God is in the midst of that city. No matter what happens around us, that community shall not be moved.

This command to "be still" can be interpreted as an invitation to be silent. But I read it as something bigger. It's an invitation to take stock of where you are in the world. Where is your being? Do you know and are you known by the people around me? Is your life feeding and fed by others? In the chaos, can you find your way back to the river that makes glad the city of God, the river of love, where all of us are home?