

Be Still and Know
Psalm 46
November 20, 2022
Thanksgiving Sunday
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, it is important to acknowledge the grief and pain of our indigenous siblings as we approach the federal holiday this week. Many indigenous people call this holiday a Day of Mourning, as they remember the harm done to them by the settler colonizers from the European continent. With respect to our indigenous siblings, let us take a moment of silence and reflect upon how we can contribute to native people's flourishing today and beyond, as they are our families, friends and neighbors.

Moment of silence

Beloved church, Psalm 46 feels appropriate for this time and place, as our church feels like it is constantly in transition, and we were recently handed another change. In a way, ever since 2020, we have been confronted with one change after another, on all levels. A pandemic, racial reckonings, insurrection, retirements and staffing changes, long-range planning and deep visioning work, election after election rocketing our anxieties to new heights. We have been through a lot. Let's hold that truth for a moment, and breathe with it. *Breathe* And we are still here.

Let me be real with you: I am an anxious person. I have a hard time being still—in my body and in my mind. I like to keep in motion, always doing something, always taking on a challenge or a project, always looking ahead to the next thing.

And if I'm not physically moving, my mind is usually racing, thinking and planning, and, yes, sometimes obsessing. It's been an interesting journey for me, through years of therapy and spiritual direction, to finally accept that anxiety is part of my mental health picture, and to find tools to deal with it. So please know, if you also deal with anxiety, you are not alone.

In church, in times of anxiety, we also must find tools to deal with the challenges we face. Luckily, we have resources and tools at our disposal, such as our Evergreen Region, wise counsel from our Executive Minister, policies and procedures, a mission to care and serve each other and our neighbors, and a values statement that encourages us and shows us a path forward with integrity and dignity. And, as people of faith, the scriptures we hold dear can also provide accompaniment, as we read stories and poetry and accounts of people who came before us and struggled with the complexities of being human, just as we are today.

Enter Psalm 46. In our Bible study on Thursday, the participants reflected together on how several of them knew snippets of this text by heart, as this psalm is one of the ones they turn to in hard times. And it is easy to see why this is pertinent.

Psalm 46 begins with a strong declaration of who God is: our refuge, our strength, a present help in times of trouble. And because of this, we do not fear...though the mountains shake and are hurled into the sea, though the sea may foam and rage. Though the Earth Herself may tremble, we do not need to fear, because we know who God is and we have experienced God's character firsthand.

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary says about the first stanza of our scripture, "according to the ancient Near Eastern view of the universe, the mountains were both the foundations that anchored the dry land in the midst of a watery chaos and the pillars that held up the sky. Thus the worst thing that could happen would be for the mountains to shake (v. 2) or tremble (v. 3), for the earth would be threatened from below by water and from above by the sky's falling."¹

This passage is not just talking about trusting in God when we stub our toe or when we don't get our way or when we are disappointed...the psalmist was trying to convey the shaking of the very foundations of the earth! When the rug is pulled out from under us, when we have to grapple with new realities, when the world is suddenly different, when there are deeply unpleasant and even hurtful truths that come out—even, and especially then, God is with us and tells us we do not need to fear!

Of course, when we are in the midst of struggle, or when we are trying to understand the shape of an event that is changing our reality, we may be tempted to roll our eyes and scoff and say "yeah, sure, God, I won't fear or whatever." And yes, that is tempting. What does God know about fear? What do the ancient authors of these Psalms really know about us today, here and now?

In the first stanza, the psalmist is trying to convey what it means to trust in God in the worst situations imaginable. And I don't know about you, but sometimes my anxiety wants me to prepare for the worst. My brain tells me, "Prepare for the worst and you won't be disappointed, you won't get hurt, you won't feel vulnerable, you'll even get to feel that superiority that comes with being able to say "I told you so" or "I knew that was going to happen" when the other shoe drops."

But into this space, with the foundations of the earth shaking, with the nations raging and the kingdoms tumbling; into this space where everything the people rely on and trust is suddenly being called into question...into this space, God says, "Be still and know that I am God."

For me, and it might be different for you, stillness is a lot to ask when it feels like the rug is pulled out from under me. Stillness is the last thing on my mind when I feel hurt, angry, or betrayed. No, I want to rush into planning and calendars and organizing and all those mechanisms that I use to control, control, control. Because if I, if we, can control something,

¹ New Interpreter's Bible, Psalm 46 commentary

doesn't that mean that we can avoid pain? That we can avoid vulnerability? That we can avoid sadness?

But the call to stillness that God's voice utters in the psalm is not just one kind of stillness. Stillness could be understood as a silent, contemplative space, a taking time apart to feel and process and pray and meditate. But the call to "be still" could also mean a call to halt, to make peace, to throw down weapons. Either way, the call to "be still" is a reminder to us that God's intention is not one of shaking foundations, of dehumanization and war, of hate and harm. God's intention is for peace, for the ending of wars, for the breaking of the implements of war. God's intention is for reconciliation and mutual flourishing.

I hear that call to "be still" in the High School students who marched to City Hall last week to protest gun violence in the wake of the shooting at Ingraham HS.

I hear that call to "be still" in the legacy of peace activists in our family of faith.

I hear that call to "be still" in the slow, bright autumn days we've been having recently, as if the world is saying, "pause a moment, and be present here and now."

I hear that call to "be still" in the Trans Day of Remembrance and Resilience, as we call for the end of violence towards transgender people and also as we remember trans* siblings we've lost.

I hear that call to "be still" in Dr. King's words to remember that the "moral arc of the universe bends toward justice"...and in the call to each of us to be the force that bends the arc.

I hear that call to "be still" in the approaching Advent season, that invites us to take a realistic look at our world and listen for the revelations of prophets, shepherds, angels...and of a young woman trying to understand God's call on her life.

"Be still and know I am God."

Where do you hear that call?

Beloved church, how does all of this relate to giving thanks? Giving thanks is a spiritual practice, just like being still is. So today—just for today—let us try out this practice of giving thanks.

We give thanks for those people in our lives who help us be still and access that Great Big Something Else that we call by many names—God, the Sacred, the Holy.

We give thanks for those individual and collective actions that bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice, from local Seattle high school students to war protestors across the world.

We give thanks that there is a spaciousness, a rock, a stability within our congregation that says we are bigger than the pain, anger, anxiety and betrayal we feel right now as a community.

We give thanks because we have learned from the Hebrew Bible and those who hold it dear that there is no such thing as individual salvation—there is only collective salvation, community salvation. God is in the midst of the city, the scripture says. The city is brought out of the time of trial together.

Beloved ones, today I give thanks for you. For all the ways that you serve each other. For all the ways that you point each other toward the stillness—toward the places we demonstrate to say “halt! Drop the weapons” like those HS kids did when they marched on city hall. For all the ways that you point each other toward stillness in the quiet, contemplative, meditative times, in music and poetry and prayer and artistic creativity. I give thanks for a God that sees, hears and knows us; a God who moves us to think beyond the worst-case scenario to bring us into the present moment and celebrate what is.

So however you need to hear the call to “be still and know” today, I pray you receive it. I pray you heed it. I pray for you with gratitude for all you are, and all you are becoming, and all we are becoming together. And I give thanks.

May it be so. Amen.