

“Stillness”

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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; he utters his voice, 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 he has brought on the earth. ⁹He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he 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** (Psalm 46)

I am grateful to Anna Grace for starting our late summer sermon series on “The Marks of Discipleship” last week. In the coming weeks, we will direct our attention to what it means to be a disciple of Christ. In a generic sense, a “disciple” is a student of a particular teacher or a follower of a certain thinker. In the Christian context, a “disciple” is one who accepts the invitation of Christ, who says “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*”¹

The plural noun “marks” also has a particular Christian meaning. When the Reformer John Calvin wrote about the “marks of the church,” he was referring to “those things by which the True Church may be recognized.” So, when we speak about the “marks of discipleship,” we are talking about the characteristics and qualities that are seen in Christian disciples. How do we recognize true disciples? What do they do? How do they act?

Last week, Anna Grace discussed the first mark in our series: “surrender.” While Christ does not expect us to give up who we are, a disciple of Christ does evidence a willingness to surrender some control to God. Disciples recognize that, as they steer their lives, God has a hand on the wheel with them.

This morning we turn to the second “mark” in our series, and that is “stillness.” One of the ways we can recognize disciples of Christ is that they seem to be unusually comfortable with sitting still. They seem to have a peace about them, even in the midst of difficult circumstances. And I think I can say with some certainty that, for most of us, stillness and peace are often illusive. Truth be told, our tech-driven lives are not slowing down. If anything they are getting faster and faster by the day.

This is certainly what the British writer Pico Iyer has observed. He should know, because he makes his living as a travel writer. He is on the move almost all the time. If he isn’t flying off to some exotic location, or seeking out the unexplored corners of the world, he is busy writing about what he saw and experienced in those places. And at some point, it all began to catch up with him. “I was racing around so much I could never catch up with

¹ Matthew 16:24.

my life,” he says. It got to the point that he could not hear himself think, or even figure out if he was really happy. And he realized that all of us, in some way, need to figure out how to take our foot off of the accelerator from time to time to, as Iyer says, “bring [some] stillness into the motion and the commotion of the world.”

Now, Iyer creates intentional pockets of time in his life to breathe, to feel, to process and reflect. He is trying to recapture and reclaim the lost art of stillness. “In an age of acceleration,” he writes, “nothing can be more exhilarating than going slow. And in an age of distraction, nothing is so luxurious as paying attention. And in an age of constant movement, nothing is so urgent as sitting still.”²

That is one of the main ideas of the ancient poem we just read, Psalm 46. The psalm urges us to reclaim the lost spiritual art of stillness. We need to do this, the psalmist says, because the world around us is anything but still. Just listen to the language of the psalm – the mountains are shaking, the waters are roaring and foaming, nations are in an uproar, and kingdoms are tottering. Things are a real mess.

But even in the midst of this chaos, the psalm repeatedly calls for calm, and one way it does this is through the Hebrew word “*selah*.” It used three times, always at the end of a line, basically dividing the poem into three roughly equal parts. The word is used like a mantra, and it is, frankly, a bit of a mystery. Literally, *selah* (סֶלָה) means “to lift up” or “to exalt.” But it doesn’t fit into the text of the poem like a normal word. It seems out of place, as if it was just plunked there at the end of the verse. That’s why many scholars believe that, in the psalms, this word was used more like a musical notation. In the same way that printed music might include a rest to tell the musicians to take a break or a breath, the written songs of the psalms use this word to indicate a place where the reader should pause for a moment of quiet reflection, to let the words of the poem sink in, to let the hearer find the deep meaning that is being shared.³

If we think about it, it is the same theological idea that the Hebrew Bible includes in the creation narrative of Genesis, and also in the covenant law. In Genesis 2, when God had finished the work of creating the heavens and the earth, we read that “*on the seventh day God ... rested ... from all the work that he had done... [and] God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.*”⁴ In other words, a time of rest and reflection, a time to pause and breathe and take stock of what is good, is built into the very fabric of creation.

It is also built into the fabric of the law that God gave us to govern that creation. Of the Ten Commandments God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai, the third one was this: “*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*”⁵

The disciple of Christ understands this that this pause in the pattern of our lives is not just an arbitrary rule to follow. It is a gift that is given to us by God for our health and

² Pico Iyer, “The Art of Stillness, TED Talk, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUBawr1hUwo>

³ <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-does-selah-mean-in-the-bible.html>

⁴ Genesis 2:1-3.

⁵ Exodus 20:8-11.

wholeness. As our creator, God knows that we need time to be still. God knows that, every so often, we need to pause so that life does not pass us by. We need to breathe so our bodies can refresh. We need to give our minds and hearts and spirits time to catch up and recognize the blessings of God that are all around us. This ancient poem repeats this reminder three times so we do not miss it. Despite the tumult in the world, despite the hectic reality of our lives, disciples who follow Christ know that we need to pause regularly to remember that “*the LORD of hosts is with us... [and that] the God of Jacob is our refuge.*”

“*Be still,*” the Lord says through the psalm, “*and know that I am God.*”

Easier said than done, right? But that is the calling, and that is a mark of a true disciple. So, in the time we have left, let’s unpack that phrase a bit. And let’s begin with what the phrase *does not mean*. It is not a call for disciples to be passive, or to be doormats. Being still is not about quitting or resigning ourselves to what is wrong in the world. It is about a purposeful pause. It is about taking a moment to take a breath and take stock of what is happening and what we are feeling, so we know which to go from there.

Being still in this way benefits us in all kinds of ways. One thing it does is to ***break the frenzied pattern of work and worry*** in which so many of us are trapped. In a sermon back in January I talked about quicksand, and how the worst thing you can do when you are trapped in quicksand is to thrash around in a panicked attempt to escape. Sometimes, even in the midst of crisis, the best thing to do is to stop squirming and assess the situation.

Take, for example, the situation in London in September of 1939. Nazi Germany had invaded Poland, and the British military was preparing for war. Rumors begin to spread that London would be a likely target for German bombers, and the citizenry naturally began to get very anxious. Many built bomb shelters in their backyards.⁶ Everyone was worried that deadly fire was about to rain from the sky. That’s when the British Ministry of Information came up with a poster, something that could motivate and encourage the nation, something to reduce the spread of panic. The message on the posters was simple: “Keep Calm and Carry On.”

Interestingly, those initial posters were only seen by a few people. They planned to put them up in the event that German infantry invaded the British Isles. Thankfully, that never happened, so the posters were never put up. Most of the originals were destroyed, and they were promptly forgotten... until the year 2000, when the owner of a small book store was sorting through a box of used books he had purchased at an auction and found one of the original 1939 posters at the bottom of the box. He thought it was cool, so he framed it and put it up in his store.⁷ From there, the original message caught fire and reprints became an overnight sensation. They caught on because the message resonates in so many situations. Sometimes, frenzied activity is not helpful. Sometimes we just need to take a moment to collect ourselves and calm ourselves so we can carry on.

Another benefit of being still is that it ***trains us to be more patient***. Waiting has become a lost art, a skill that has grown weak by lack of use. I remember my childhood pastor sharing a story of an older woman he visited in the Presbyterian Home who had a needlepoint pillow that read, “Lord, give me patience... and I want it right now!”⁸ And that was forty years ago, when all TV’s didn’t have remote controls, and most phones had rotary

⁶ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/events/the_blitz

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keep_calm_and_carry_on

⁸ Dr. Joseph B. Mullin, *Grab Life* (self-published), p.108.

dials. In this day and age, when information is always readily at hand, when just about anything can be delivered to our door in a day or so, we are really losing the ability – and the will -- to wait for anything. But waiting is a part of life, especially when we are talking about God. I believe that God is active in the world, but God also acts in God's own good time. God is not beholden to our schedule. I think that is why the psalms talk about waiting for God all the time:

Psalm 25 -- *“Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long... May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you, O Lord “;*

Psalm 27 -- *“Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!”;*

Psalm 37 -- *“Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him (Psalm 37:7).*

And while we accept this waiting, something else happens to us – ***we are reminded that God's presence is close at hand***, that God's love for us is real, and that God's help is coming. Being still creates space for our faith to assert itself, even in moments of crisis. Again, the psalmists talk about this benefit repeatedly:

Psalm 40 -- *“I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.”*

Psalm 33 -- *“Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield.”*

Being still can give us the confidence, assurance, resolve, and courage to make the same affirmation of faith we read in today's psalm, Psalm 46... namely, that *“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... The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”*

The ability to be still, and to know that the living God is with us, is a mark of a true disciple. To quote Pico Iyer, disciples of Christ know that, “In an age of acceleration, nothing can be more exhilarating than going slow...[that] in an age of distraction, nothing is so luxurious as paying attention... [and that] in an age of constant movement, nothing is so urgent as sitting still.”

Amen.