

Be Still!

The Discipline of Earnest Presence

Psalm 46

RBC

September 26, 2021

Introduction

Good morning Central. It is amazing (and a little surreal!) to be here with you this morning.

This morning I want to take you through Psalm 46, a favourite of mine, and share with you some ways in which this psalm regularly challenges and encourages me especially over the last year or so. Before going any further, let me offer a prayer. **Please pray with me.**

First, a question: Do you trust God?

In Christianity, we can mean different things:

Trust for the future? [...]

For the past? [...]

Though they provide context for us, neither interests me this morning. I am interested in the moments of life. The future and the past do more than just provide context for our faith. They also provide meaning to every moment of our life.

So, in *your* moments, do you trust God? Only you can truly answer that question for yourself. Sure, people around you can guess at what the answer might be from how you live, but you are the only one who knows the answer besides God himself.

As I mentioned, the lessons from this Psalm have resonated in my mind over the last year mainly because, I must admit, I have been caught off-guard by the way people are treating each other amid this health crisis. I am not surprised that people think differently about things. I am surprised and even shocked that everyone seems so quick to not just attack the point of view of another, but to attack the person as well. Right?

Now, before I go any further, I want to assure you that I'm NOT going to talk for long about this topic or try and slip in my opinions on the matter. I raise the issue because as discouraged as all this makes me, there is a ring of familiarity to it. There is something about how people are interacting on social media and in this streets that reminds me of the way I act. It is something deep and personal and I think I know what it is.

Maybe some of you can relate. I know that **if my internal life is somehow disturbed and out of order, my external life is disrupted.** I know that if I am anxious about something, frustrated, fearful, or angry, I will be short with my family, I will pull back from my friends, and I will resist the promptings of the Holy Spirit. I don't always realize that is what is going on, but when I do, when I am reminded about this idea, it helps me to regain my footing.

I wonder if people are experiencing something similar. The pandemic evokes fear, the mandated restrictions evoke frustration, all the information on the internet available from all kinds of sources evokes confusion and maybe, just maybe, the way many of us try to gain some sense in all of this, attempt to gain a measure of equilibrium, of control, is to try and control all the externalities by force. We lash out. We point fingers. We condemn others.

I wonder if the better route is first inward.

So, let me ask again, do you trust God? In light of all that is going on around us, do you trust God? How do you know if you are trusting? How can I trust?

This is where Psalm 46 offers us its wisdom. So, let's look at Psalm 46. Please look at your Bible as I read:

Psalm 46

God's Defense of His City and People

To the leader. Of the Korahites. According to Alamo. A Song.

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
- ³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*
- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.
- ⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.
- ⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*
- ⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
- ⁹ He 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."
- ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*¹

What a psalm.

My hope this morning is simply that each of take some time alone before God to answer the question: This God, the one described in such a way; the one present right now, do I trust him? AND that each one of us will personally commit to follow through. Internal before external.

To get to that place I want to walk us through Psalm 46 with a gradually increasing focus on the first part of verse 10, **for me the star of the show**:

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Ps 46.

Be still, and know that I am God.

The Wide View

Though nobody seems certain, the historical context for this Psalm could be an event such as:

- The destruction of the armies of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir during the reign of Jehoshaphat in Judah (2 Chron. 20:1–30)²: mid-ninth century BC
- The destruction of the army of the Assyrian King Sennacherib during the reign of Hezekiah in Judah (2 Kings 18–19)³: (end of the eighth century BC)

The language of the Psalm does suggest that in some way the world of the psalmist seems to either be crashing down on or just recovering from a time when it started to crash. That is important because the kinds of things noted in this Psalm are two of the greatest existential threats to the human being: extreme political menace and extreme natural menace. In terms of instigating instability, those are a couple of doozies. In other words, the Psalmist presents the message in a context of extremes such that if it applies in these situations, then it applies when I lose my job, or when my marriage falls apart, or my child dies, or my health starts to fail. Or even if I can't find a parking space, or if someone cuts me off in traffic or disagrees with me or anything that makes me feel as if I'm losing any control of the external aspects of my life.

The Psalm is divided nicely for us around what many scholars think is a musical notation, "Selah." It might have been a place where the lead guitarist was to break out in a screaming solo or the pianist was directed to play a soft interpretation of the melody line or it might have been just a time of silent reflection as in the case with a musical rest notation.

Given that there are three "Selahs" we'll quickly draw three summaries of three themes in this Psalm.

The first Selah shows up at end of verse three and so we can consider verses one through three as our first unit. In these three verses we have a declaration that the person of God, his very presence acts for us something like a place of refuge. When everything else is falling apart, even those things we think might never give way – the mountains and the seas and other otherwise immovable features of life – even then, God remains steadfast. Nothing can shake God. Nothing can move God. Nothing can overpower God. Nothing can get at anyone with God.

1. **Verses 1-3 then could be summed up in the phrase from verse one: "God is our refuge and strength." He is firm.**

Then, building on the first Selah, the second one adjusts the context slightly to focus on political turmoil but uses similar language. Instead of the waters roaring and mountains shaking it is the nations roaring and shaking. In the midst of that chaos, amid the powerlessness that accompanies the presence of an army of others displaying human might, we feel weak. But in the midst of geo-political forces that seek to consume each other and us, God remains at peace. No human quest for power can surprise him. Nothing that humans can develop or plan or scheme, can

² Boice, J. M. (2005). *Psalms 42–106: An Expository Commentary* (p. 390). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

³ Boice, J. M. (2005). *Psalms 42–106: An Expository Commentary* (p. 391). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

overwhelm him. In fact, as the Psalmist points out, compared to the roiling and fomenting of human society that depletes life, God's presence calms and rejuvenates like a river refreshing the land. Unbridled, power-hungry, fearful humanity consumes and destroys while God's presence protects and nurtures.

2. **Verses 4-7 then could be summed up in the phrase from verse seven: "the God of Jacob is our fortress." He is secure.**

Finally, the third **Selah** presents us with a moment to reflect on the absolute authority and power of God; that no other nation, or people, or principality, or ruler, or force of any kind, can withstand the power of God when He acts at the right time. Every implement of opposition is rendered useless against the irrepressible force of God. The presence of God brings the hope of the end of conflict, repression, domination and provides peace. As one scholar put it, as noted in this Psalm, God's power is not focussed on bringing war but on stopping it.

3. **Verses 8-11 could be summed up in the phrase: "He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth." He is victorious (peaceful).**

Nothing too surprising to this point, right? Stuff you are likely used to hearing especially if you've been around a Christian church for any length of time (but still encouraging!). There are powerful things at work around us that effect our lives but no matter how powerful these forces seem, even the most powerful of forces, God is bigger and better. From the very beginning of the biblical narrative God is never overwhelmed. Since humanity's rebellion in the Garden of Eden through being rejected by his chosen people, right to the very cross of his Chosen One, his Son, God remains the most powerful one in the room and is not put off course.

Here's the thing. It is not just that God is the biggest and the toughest, it is that he is that way FOR US. It is not just that God is immovable, safe and will be ultimately victorious in the great swings of the nations, it is that he is that way for anyone who responds to him.

Notice that up until verse 10 the Psalmist makes observations and offers commentary displaying a deep faithfulness. **Then**, it is as if God breaks in on these words of a faithful one with an important reminder: You be still! And know that I am God. This is the big picture of Psalm 46: God (the one whose presence we are seeking out, right?!) is firm, he is safe, and he is victorious. But then this firm, safe and victorious God interrupts the faithful declarations of his servant with a personal call to respond. Trusting God is not just a statement of faith. No matter what we think/believe, in our humanity we need God's grace to follow through; to live out; to express what we believe before the one in whom we believe. We need God to break into our experience sometimes and remind us of his presence.

So, let's focus in on that phrase.

Time to Focus

I'm going take us through this phrase out of order, saving the "be still" for the last.

The Psalmist writes, "be still, and know."

“and know”

Most every reference to knowledge in the Bible, the entire Bible, involves experience and though information acquisition is a kind of experience it does not reflect the entirety of what God means by “know.” It means to realize, understand, come to see, experience the reality. This is an invitation to see for ourselves. It is not meant to be read as if God is here to strictly present us with some information. So when Paul prays for the Philippians that their love would overflow with the knowledge, he was speaking of their experience (1.9). When we read in Colossians that followers of Christ would grow in knowledge it is in the context of living out, of applying the things that they believe (1.10).

These are the words to the psalmist from God, but the message has not changed. The historical situation may have; the situation in time also may have changed, but the message has not. It can not.

The message is foundational. It is essential. It is at the very heart of what we call “the Gospel”. Someone somewhere is in trouble and only God can help. They are actually words of good news because it invites us to know Him, to experience Him, for ourselves. Jesus invited his first disciples to follow him, and that same invitation is extended to you and me. In that invitation we are not meant to simply admire Jesus but to imitate him. This is good news because it invites us to know life, the way it was designed. [This is where it begins. This is where it applies directly to you and to me when we submit to him as God...]

What are we to know specifically?

“that I am God”

I want to address this phrase in two ways.

First, only someone present can properly use the first-person singular. Only a subject, a person with a centre of consciousness can properly use the pronoun, “I”. If we are in a crowd (remember those??) and you hear someone say your name, you might call out, “Who said that.?” If you hear the response, “I did” you will likely turn towards the sound of the voice because it means that person is right there. “I am God,” says God. This means that you and I must understand this message as delivered by God, Himself, personally. No messenger this time. God is present.

In fact, if we’ve been paying attention, he has been present all throughout this psalm as explained by the Psalmist:

- “a very PRESENT help” (1)
- “God is in the midst (of the city – the “city” does not just bear his name but contains his presence)” (5)
- “The Lord of Hosts is with us” (7, 11)

This is one of the things about the Christian faith, that can be easily missed because it is so familiar. Almighty God is present. This claim is incredible. In various ways, the activity of entering our life is what most occupies God. Throughout the biblical story God is constantly descending into human lives. Walking with Adam and Eve, appearing in storms, in fires, in smoke, in visions and dreams, speaking directly and indirectly, God intentionally presents

himself before us culminating with the incarnation of his Son. It is this presentation that best reveals who he is and, as you likely know, that presentation is striking.

In his book, *The Furious Longing of God*, Brennan Manning explains:

“By entering human history, God has demolished all previous conceptions of who God is and what man is supposed to be. We are, suddenly, presented with a God who suffers crucifixion. This is not the God of the philosophers who speak with cool detachment about the Supreme Being. A Supreme Being would never allow spit on His face.”⁴

This is what it looks like to be both almighty and for us.

Before the birth of Jesus, Joseph is given a vision in which he is instructed to give the boy the name “Immanuel” which, as you know, means “God with us.”

Be still and know that I am God.

“that I am God”

He is God. He alone is sovereign. He alone transcends time and space, mortality and evil and can overcome each of these things that feel so inexorably tied to our existence. He is over all.

Be still and know that I am God.

But even here we may face frustration for it is easy to believe that when things seem to be going well, isn't it? When life is relatively easy, when we have our health, when we have plenty of money, when we have comfort; in those times we can, without hesitation sing, I'd rather have Jesus. Rather, it can be much harder to trust in God's offer of presence when it feels like his words are just words; we don't feel his presence as others seem to.

Sometimes we go through life like John the Baptist.

John the Baptist, who publicly declared that Jesus is God's promised answer to the world's struggle; the good news for all people, only to find himself in a desperate situation. After sending some of his few remaining companions to ask Jesus for confirmation, hears something similar to the Psalmist, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Luke 7.22; cf., Isa42??).

See?

I'm sure John was stirred at those words. Inspired. Comforted? But I can't help but wonder if after hearing those words from Jesus that John might have thought, “Those are all great Jesus but...what about me? Haven't I done all that God asked of me; all that I was set apart from my conception to do? What about me?”

You know that John would never taste freedom again, at least on this earth.

⁴ Manning, Brennan (2009-03-01). *The Furious Longing of God* (pp. 115-116). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.

At any point in John's life experience did God cease to be sovereign? We can look back and assure John that even though all of that is true about his life, God is still firm, safe, and he will ultimately be victorious. Sometimes we just need to have the longer view in mind.

Be still and know that I am God. Now let us look at the opening to this statement:

“Be Still!”

This term is a fascinating one. It is used 45 times in the Hebrew Scriptures and 3 times in the New Testament. I don't normally look up a word or phrase in the Bible in that way. Usually, I'll look at a few different occurrences and conclude, yeah, kind of what I thought. In this case I was so surprised by the first few that I kept going and going.

At first glance, the phrase seems straight forward right. “Be still.” Sounds nice and soothing as if you were sitting on your mother's lap after falling down and she is holding you close saying, “It's ok. It's ok.”

Nope. In almost every other instance in the Bible it is a negative term. For instance:

- in Exodus 5, when Pharaoh is just starting to get frustrated with Moses and in response to the initial request for freedom, he makes brick-making harder and calls the Israelites, “lazy” (our word).
- In several places in Deuteronomy God promises not to “leave” or “abandon” the Israelites (“leave” and “abandon” = more examples of the use of our word).
- In the face of various instances of trouble – like the advent of enemy armies - people are referred to as “weak”, “failing”, “feeble”, “discouraged” and hands are said to “go limp.”
- In one final example of the use of our word, the four living creatures in the vision described in Ezekiel chapter 1 with massive, powerful wings, are said to “lower” or “let down” those wings when they hear the voice of God. God's voice overpowers even the most powerful.

Be still.

We read it here and it seems like it is presented in a way that makes us think it was said softly and calmly. Kind of like, “Relax.” Or even “Chill out.”

Keep in mind the immediate context of this instruction; there is death and destruction all around. So, amid desolations, in the midst of wars where bows and spears and shields are usually necessary instruments, God says: “None of this can stand against my power.” The term is an imperative. That means that if you don't mind writing in your Bible (if it isn't there already), you should write an exclamation mark at the end of “Be still” and the end of the phrase.

The illustration that I think best captures the effect of this term in the text is this: [whistle]. For a couple of years, I coached the equivalent to grade eight and nine girls' volleyball teams. It was great. I really enjoyed those times. Sometimes, the girls would come to the gym after a day of school and be extra energized. They would run around, throw balls at each other and scream. Honestly, to me it was a joyful sound and sometimes, I would just relish in it. You should know that my wife and I have three daughters, so this sort of experience is not unfamiliar. But during

those times, the only way to get their attention would be to blow the whistle. Sometimes, I would have to blow it a few times, but it got their attention.

“Be still,” is God’s whistle blow. This is God saying: “Enough!” (which might be the English term that best catches the heart of the word). “Enough! Stop what you are doing! Stop struggling against me, you cannot win. Stop just saying that you trust me and trust me! YOU! You be still to give you the context for trust. HERE I AM!” This is what it means to “Be still,” the only appropriate response in the presence of absolute power. It is a term that really seems to be used to describe submission, giving up in the presence of power; a realization that no matter how hard they may struggle, or how brave they are or how proud they are, they are just no match.

God speaks to the Psalmist and instructs him to give up.

This is God’s message: “Enough! Look, I am right here, and I am God.” I think this is where it begins. This is the place, an inward place in God’s presence as he tells us enough and reminds us that he alone is God, where you and I can determine how to best respond to the outer things. This is the place that helps to hear from God in terms of how he wants us to respond to that co-worker that seems to undermine us, or the neighbour that seems to have no respect, or the spouse who puts energy into work and coasts at home, or the person who insists on their point of view or the friend who does not meet expectations, and the list goes on. This is the place to begin preventing your outer life from disturbing your inner life, but it takes discipline.

Psalm 46 provides the structure for what could be called *The Discipline of Earnest Presence*.

Earnest Presence (expressing trust)

There is personal discipline required in response to this Psalm. There are activities that we can practice that strengthen our trust. The first thing is that we must hear God say “Enough!” To our attempts at controlling things, at making things fit into our plans, fulfill our desires, meet our expectations.

1. Awareness (I am not alone)

a. Bible:

- i. God explains that “I will never leave you or forsake you,” (Heb13.5)
- ii. Jesus says that “I will not leave you orphaned” (Jn14.18)
- iii. Pentecost displayed the internal presence of the Spirit of God in his followers.

b. Life

- Many authors suggest that existence itself bears a kind of witness to the presence of God: “echoes of a voice”, “natural sign”, “natural law” (CS Lewis, NT Wright, Stephen Evans)
 - Morality: Right and Wrong
 - Spirituality
 - Relationship
 - Joy
 - Cosmic Wonder

- Natural Order
- Others explore the darker corners of human existence (Paul Tillich/Soren Kierkegaard)
 - Death/Fate
 - Meaninglessness/Emptiness
 - Condemnation/Guilt
 - Anxiety/Despair

Each of these things can be sign-posts, reminders of God's presence; that God is personally present with you.

2. Submission (I am taking refuge in You)

This is where each one must fight their own battle. We cannot trust God if we don't submit to Him because those are his terms. Paul famously wrote to the Roman Christians that "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved." Jesus is Lord. Do we know what that means? He is king, he is the ultimate authority, what he says goes, he is the way, the truth and the life. Nobody and nothing else. Are we truly willing to submit to God? Not just once. Not just giving lip-service as if somehow our words distract God from viewing the true state of our hearts. It means surrendering to Him and then resurrendering and resurrendering and resurrendering each time we mess up or at the beginning of each day or every time we are reminded that God is God.

3. Trust (You are firm, safe and (will be) victorious)

Like the Psalmist here is where we affirm that because God is firm, safe and that he will be victorious, no matter how everything looks on the outside – and that can be difficult – he is therefore trust-worthy. Here is when we find ourselves in a better starting point to respond to the craziness of life; respond in a way that can actually bring glory to God. When we demonstrate our trust (because trust is a verb) by responding the way God directs to that co-worker, neighbour, spouse, driver, boss, to that illness, injury, frustration, fear.

Getting things settled on the inside before God is not a guarantee that everything will settle on the outside. I wish it did and it will once Jesus returns. Until then we have the opportunity every day to order our inner person on the trustworthiness of God and then respond to our outer lives accordingly. It can be difficult and so sometimes we need the support of others along the way, but it must begin with each of us alone before God and listen to him say, "Enough!" It is when we hear those words and know the character of the One who speaks them that we will be ready to live a life worthy of the calling that we have received, a calling that leads first to his presence and then in submission to live in light of a God who is firm, safe and will be victorious.

