

“Still”

A Sermon by Katherine W. Cooke

First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, NC

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Psalm 46

Over the course of the past week and a half or so, I have been witness to an extraordinary thing unfolding just outside my door. One evening, as I was puttering around doing what we do at home- straightening up the living room, changing loads of laundry, dealing with the mail, I went out on the porch to water my plants. I was distracted with the thoughts of the day and wasn't paying much attention as I pulled the hanging ferns down from their hooks.

I tipped the watering can into one as I looked down at it, and stopped myself just before unleashing a waterfall upon a beautiful little nest with seven perfect speckled eggs in it. It is springtime, the time for birds to nest and lay eggs, so this can't be categorized as a unique or rare occurrence. But it's new to me. Never before had I seen one up close like this, in my little space, in a plant I was caring for.

The fragility and beauty of the nest, not to mention its unexpected appearance in the midst of my mundane daily tasks, moved me beyond words, and I stood still for some moments, in awe of what was before me.

Of course, in what I want to believe is a natural human response to something so indescribably beautiful, my first thought was to DO something.

How could I make sure the nest was secure, the eggs had what they needed, the mama bird felt safe when visiting her nest? I wondered. What might the bird or the eggs need? Surely there was something I could do to help this whole natural process along!

Fortunately, common sense quickly returned. But I admit that it has taken no small amount of self-control for me not to micromanage the nest; to leave it alone, and allow nature to take its course.

I've watched from a distance as mama bird has sat on her eggs while papa bird kept watch on the balcony railing below. And just this week, I've seen the tiny hatchlings with their beaks open wide, waiting to be fed. I've reveled in it from a reasonable distance. It's a small thing, I know, but it has brought me a lot of joy.

There's something extraordinary, I think, about close encounter with nature in all its unencumbered, unscripted, uncontrolled beauty.

Though it is all around us, it is surprisingly rare that we get glimpses such as this that are not edited or retouched, not sanitized or controlled in some way, just nature as it is, without any artifice. To behold one example of the natural processes of life is to witness a miracle and be reminded that, though we seem so in control, seem to have figured so much out, ultimately, when we think we're in charge, we're just wrong.

We can make a lot of things happen, but we can't put a bird in a nest, make her lay eggs, make the eggs hatch, and send the baby birds on their merry little way.

Sometimes we forget that, though, and we need to be reminded. Sometimes we are reminded in beautiful, peaceful ways like seeing a bird's nest or witnessing a sunset. There are small, beautiful moments in every day that, if we are paying attention, remind us of God's majesty and grace.

But sometimes we are jarred back to that truth by tragedy or heartbreak. Often it is in the struggles of life that we are reminded of how much we need our God as our refuge and our strength.

The words of Psalm 46 speak powerfully to what we know of God through our faith. These familiar words, the foundation for Martin Luther's signature hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, elucidate a truth about our lives that is as true today as it was for the psalmist who wrote these words thousands of years ago, as meaningful to us now as they were to the great Reformer who faced countless foes in his work to bring needed reform to a church in crisis.

Like all those who have gone before us in the faith, we live a life of two realities. *God is our refuge and strength*, the psalm reminds us, but *the earth changes*. *God is a very present help in trouble*, still *the mountains shake in the heart of the sea*.

It's a conundrum, really. The one statement is true- God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Yet so is the other- the earth changes and the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. We have faith in a loving, all-powerful God, yet we also believe what we see and what we live, and often those two seem incompatible.

We who seek to live a life of faith live with the reality that while we trust in God and know that our strength comes finally and only from him, this world is not perfect; nations rage, floods and earthquakes destroy, bodies succumb to illness, relationships disintegrate.

In the face of these two seemingly inconsistent realities, we experience great confusion. We can't help but wonder how we are to reconcile our faith's claim of a sovereign, loving God who is a very present help in trouble with our life's reality of a fallen and sinful world.

It seems to me that there are two ways for us to be in the face of these competing realities.

And for most of us, most of the time, I think we respond in the way people through the ages have responded, the way humans seem to naturally react in the face of struggle- we seek to do something.

Doctrines have been created, religious movements begun, books written and sermons preached, all in an attempt to explain how God can be sovereign yet tragedy continues to happen. Incalculable amounts of human energy have been expended to address this question, to assuage our fears and conquer our doubts, to explain definitively how it can be that God is our refuge yet still we know hardship.

But what is all this doing getting us? If we're honest, we know that we are no closer to understanding how exactly God works than our Hebrew ancestors were. In fact, despite all our knowledge, we may be even farther away from it than they ever were.

We have scientific and technical knowledge that would cause them to reel. We can explain how tornados happen and what the sun is made of when it is going to rain (sort of). We know things that the people who fled the wrath of Pharoah and wandered in the wilderness, who settled in the promised land and defied the cultic worship of their culture could never ever imagine.

Yet in spite of our fantastic knowledge and advanced technology, we have been totally unable to come up with anything resembling an answer to this most fundamental question of faith and life. It overwhelms us.

And when things get overwhelming and out of control, most of us try to figure out what it is that we can DO to make things better.

Our response to the confusion that arises when life in all its complexity tries to wrest our attention away from God and faith is all too often to try to fill that space with stuff-with words, actions, thoughts, events, in an attempt to distract ourselves and to perpetuate the illusion that we have it figured out, that we are okay, that we can handle things just fine on our own. We try to fill up the space so that the questions don't have any room to maneuver, and we feel, even for a moment, that we have things under control.

But you and I both know that this is a fleeting and fragile control.

There's another way for us to be in the face of struggle, though, another way to seek to reconcile our trust in God as our refuge with our experience of the instability of life. The Psalmist speaks clearly to this.

Be still*, the Psalmist writes, *and know that I am God.

Be still. The Hebrew word used here has the sense of God saying, "Enough. Just stop. Settle down and be quiet!" Stop all this striving and conniving, seeking and achieving for just a second, disabuse yourself of the notion that you are in charge. Be still. You are not God.

There are few statements more countercultural than this, few passages of scripture more challenging to our modern American sensibilities.

Be still? But stillness is the opposite of movement, and I have to be moving to be living. Stillness connotes laziness or lack of motivation or absence of purpose, and that's not acceptable to a successful, accomplished, valued member of society such as myself. I can't be still, I don't want to be still.

We have convinced ourselves that stillness is something to be feared, something to be avoided at all costs. We've come to believe that the busier we are, the more we do, the more needed, capable, and indispensable we are, the more control we have over life in all its complexity.

Well, we try to believe it anyway. But the words of Psalm 46 urge us to reevaluate.

Be still*, the psalmist says, *and know that I am God.

Be still. Slow down, calm down, put down your weapons. But lest we be misled, we need to know that this isn't a couch potato stillness we're talking about.

This kind of stillness, this spiritual stillness in the face of the mighty, mysterious, transcendent sovereign God is not lazy stillness or purposeless stillness or weak stillness. It is quite the opposite, in fact, for it is a stillness that demands we transcend our base human selves for the sake of opening our lives, our hearts, our minds, ourselves to a God who seeks us and desires to be in relationship with us.

It is a stillness that men and women of faith have sought through the years. It is the “still, small voice” Elijah experienced as God drew near to him, the stillness Jesus sought in the Garden of Gethsemane as the threat of death loomed large in his sight.

It is the stillness Paul experienced after Jesus appeared to him, when he temporarily lost his ability to see and speak as his life was forever being changed, the stillness that allowed him to speak of the peace that passes all understanding.

It is the stillness that people find in worship, in prayer, in contemplation, in silence.

It is an active stillness, a stillness with a purpose, a stillness that feels unnatural to those who are unfamiliar with it, but which is as fundamental to our humanity as the very breath we breathe.

St. Augustine, the 5th century theologian and church father wrote a simple truth in his seminal book, *The Confessions*. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord,” he wrote, “and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

As creatures of a loving God, our natural state is to be in communion with our creator. Apart from God, we cannot experience the beauty and power of being still. In God, we discover a stillness that is both energizing and renewing.

In his commentary on this Psalm, Augustine described it this way:

To what purpose are we to be still? “And know that I am God.” That is, not you, but I am God. I created, I create anew; I formed, I form anew; I made, I make anew. If you could not make yourself, how can you make yourself anew?

There is much in our world today that commands our attention. There are challenges that seem insurmountable and problems that seem unsolvable. Oil continues to pour into the fragile waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Young people commit heinous acts of violence, ending other young lives. Natural disasters shatter lives and economic uncertainty robs people of hope and security.

In the face of such public trauma, and in the face of the trauma in individual lives, we feel helpless, but still we want to fix it, because, after all, that’s what we do.

Who hasn’t felt that overwhelming desire to rush in and help when they learn of a tragedy? That is all well and good, of course, but in our rush to DO, too often we forget to stop and listen. When we think that things can only be solved by our work, our deeds, our actions, we run the risk of placing ourselves in God’s place, which is not a place we can be.

Ruth Haley Barton, a teacher and spiritual director, recently wrote an article entitled “Make a Joyful Silence,” in which she discussed the benefits of the contemplative life and how spiritual practices of silence and contemplation, discarded by Reformers in the 16th century, are reemerging in the lives of Protestants.

The value of these practices, she argues, is in their departure from that on which we have come to rely too much- words. “We are often so enamored with creating theological systems to help us make sense out of God that we have lost touch with the actual *experience* of God that engages our whole being,” she writes.¹

“In our focus on activity,” Barton continues, “we are not very good at waiting for the work that only God can do. In our worldliness, we are not very good at being silent so we can hear God speak.”

Despite all our words, all our knowledge, all our religious doctrine, it is, finally, only in the stillness and silence of our lives that we can truly begin to experience God as our refuge and strength.

When difficulty comes our way and we respond only by doing, then we crowd out the voice of the God who desires to be in relationship with us. When we put ourselves at the center of the world, convinced that what we think, what we know, what we want, will solve problems and make everything better, we turn our backs on the sovereign love of God whose ways are not our ways, whose thoughts are not our thoughts.

It’s not that our words, our thoughts, our actions are bad. In fact, they are integral and vital parts of our faith and devotional life. But they are not all that there is.

If the only way we experience our faith is by doing something, then we are missing something very important. Sometimes it is in the not doing that we are most richly blessed. Sometimes it is in the slowing down, the turning away from quick answers and easy solutions, the quieting of our hearts and stilling of our minds in the face of confusion, pain, or anxiety, that we find ourselves embraced by God in ways we had never imagined possible.

Sometimes the best response to the complexities of life is the most counterintuitive one: sometimes, instead of doing something, anything, it’s best to do nothing. As a hospital chaplain once instructed a young seminarian heading to visit a family in crisis, “Don’t just do something. Stand there.”

I can’t stop thinking about the nest on my porch. I feel a connection to those birds that I can’t quite explain. What I do know is that I am grateful to these little creatures for the big lesson they are teaching me. They’ve reminded me to slow down, to remember that there is so much beauty, so much wonder in this world.

They’ve shown me that, in my hurry to get everything done that needs to be done, if I don’t slow down, I might just miss the most important things.

Be still, and know that I am God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Ruth Haley Barton, “Make a Joyful Silence,” *Sojourners Magazine*, February 2009.