

RELAX, STOP, BE CALM

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Text: Psalm 46:10

I am so grateful to Ruth Waterbury for submitting verse 10 of Psalm 46 as part of our Command to Preach series, “Be still, and know that I am God!” I was fortunate enough to have lunch with Ruth and David this past week, and our conversation was a great gift. We talked about several texts, and Ruth left me with a bit of wisdom that both inspired and challenged me as I sat with Psalm 46: “These texts contain truth . . . if we’re willing to listen.” I invite you to attend to that wisdom as we hear the words of Psalm 46:

*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.*

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
God utters God’s voice, the earth melts.*

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

*Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations God has brought on the earth.
The Lord makes wars cease
to the end of the earth;
breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
burns the shields with fire.
“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”*

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

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Several years ago, I did my seminary immersion experience in Guatemala. For nearly three weeks, we drove the countryside of Guatemala, visiting the survivors and descendants of the martyred of Guatemala’s 36-year civil war. Every place we visited still bore the marks of warfare, including bombed

and burned-out buildings, bullet holes visible on standing structures, and broken and scarred bodies of survivors.

In our travels, we made our way through the rural highlands to the small, beautiful village Santiago Atitlan with its beautiful volcanic hills and serene lakes. It was so quaint and picturesque that one would be hard-pressed to find any sign of it being touched by war. Indeed, it was. We visited the little Catholic church in the village, St. James of the Apostle, which bore both the signs of war and a shrine to the memory of their beloved Father Stanley Rother, who was known as “The Shepherd Who Didn’t Run.” Father Stanley had been sent to the parish in 1968 from the Oklahoma Diocese, and he set about serving and falling in love with the indigenous and peasant populations. They became a beloved community and together they did so much good, including building schools and a medical clinic and creating a farm co-op. By the time civil war made it to the village in the late 1970s, Father Stanley became a thorn in the side of the ruling regime.

Many of the members of the parish he had confirmed were soon disappeared or murdered. Instead of cowering in fear or hiding away, Father Stanley fed and sheltered the widows and children of the murdered and the disappeared. He could be seen walking the rural roads in the aftermath of violent government attacks looking for dead bodies to give the victims proper burials. Eventually, Father Stanley’s name was being circulated on kill-list, and the bishops back in the United States urged him to leave. Father Stanley replied in letters to Oklahoma: “The reality is that we are in danger . . . Given the situation, I am not ready to leave here just yet . . . If it is my destiny that I should give my life here then so be it . . . I don’t want to desert these people . . . There is still a lot of good that can be done under the circumstances . . . The shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger.” Seven months after Father Stanley wrote that letter, in June 1981, three men broke into the church and overtook Father Stanley. Father Stanley never screamed for help even as he engaged with them to distract them from potentially attacking nine nuns living in the convent on the property. He was shot twice and killed. What made him stand strong when the conventional response was to run? How could he remain calm in an environment of violence and death? Why didn’t he arm himself to protect the church and the convent? I know he must have been afraid, but he evinced no anxiety. There appeared to be in him a confidence in God’s presence that revealed one possessed with the discipline to “be still and know that I am God.” In the end, God waged peace in the land and won.

Just hearing “Be still and know that I am God” brought to my mind the images of Father Stanley and the shrine to him in the St. James the Apostle church, because they reinforce how powerful a concept refuge is, especially in times of trouble. Psalm 46 contains two familiar and oft-quoted verses in our hymns, liturgies, and religious rhetoric: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,” and “Be still, and know that I am God!” I would argue that our religious imagination, especially in our political rhetoric, has placed outsized focus on the strength of God at the expense of God as refuge. I’m not quibbling with the descriptions of God as refuge, strength, and help. However, it’s just that the martial language so vivid in a hymn like “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” appears to roll more easily off our tongues than the invitation to be still and let God be God. Martin Luther penned the hymn, and although he indulged those martial images in the lyrics, the place where Luther lived in hiding, the Wartburg Castle, was indeed a refuge from danger, nestled high on a hill surrounded by a thick blanket of forest. It is indeed a place of refuge.

The people Israel did not have a physical refuge like that in which to hide, but they knew God as refuge. So, they sang Psalm 46, a song of Zion, in which they celebrated God’s presence with them in the holy city of Jerusalem. Surrounded by the threat of the sea, which was often the tip of the spear of natural disasters, and the threat of the nations, who warred for power and riches, Israel testified in song that God is with them through it all. The earth will change, the mountains will shake, the waters roar and foam, the nations are in an uproar, and the kingdom’s totter. But God . . . God is with the people. God’s presence is always a sure defense against chaos, uproar, and disorder. Their history testified to what God had done. “Be still and know that I am God.”

And yet, the desire to be the master of one's own fate was ever there . . . to ensure their safety, maybe they, too, must take up arms. Sometimes, the seas are too menacing, and the nations are too strong to relax, stop, and be calm. Sometimes, God's absence is felt more acutely than God's presence. Sometimes, we want the insurance policy of self-protection through bigger weapons, more control, or simply by becoming our own gods. There were times when the idea of trusting God seemed naïve and careless.

But the psalmist knows that, no matter how chaotic the world gets, God has yet to act. God has a role to play in what will unfold. So, Israel will trust the presence of God. Israel beholds the works of the Lord. They sing that God makes wars cease. God breaks the bow, shatters the spear, and burns the shields. One theologian declares that Israel places its trust in a "warrior who wages peace" (J. Clinton McCann, Jr.) by destroying implements of war. In response to the inevitability of war, the unending prerogative of natural disasters, the menacing reality of evil and unfaithfulness, ultimately our security, our protection, our refuge is found in God who is with us no matter what.

Now, I want to make clear that I am not likening us to the ancient people of Israel, who in their unique, particular circumstance, sang this song to conquer real fears of real dangers from nature and the nations and to bear witness to the God who helped them and delivered them time and again. I am however inviting us to a discipline of trust in God that combats our own tendency toward self-assertion, self-absorption, and self-protection, the very qualities in us that exacerbate war, division, and chaos. I'm talking about beholding the presence of God in the midst such that when all around us the world is devolving into chaos, we can be still and know that God is present. And that when it is all said and done, war, chaos, and disorder cannot prevail.

This is ever more relevant now. In the last few years, our nation appears to be experiencing a cold civil war, in which we simply cannot agree on the basic facts about science, politics, and economics. Violent attacks against others because of racial, sexual, religious, or political difference are on the rise. Some suppose that the answer to these challenges lies in arming ourselves or segregating ourselves into like-minded ethnic or political enclaves. In this environment, who will be still and soothe this national, cultural anxiety? Perhaps we are that presence. We can love because God is with us. We can serve because God is with us. We can hope because God is with us.

Father Stanley is one of those in a long line of the faithful, most vividly demonstrated by the people of Israel, who understood that, in the midst of oppression, domination, and exploitation, God is with us. Israel, Father Stanley, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Archbishop Óscar Romero, and Nelson Mandela are those faithful who stood strong in light of the menace of nature and nations. They confronted with their trust in God nations and kingdoms that warred against weaker nations and people, killed the vulnerable, and menaced God's people. Their lives and their work testify that God is our refuge and our strength. They never let fear win though the threats were real and, for too many of them, fatal.

Even if we sing this song of trust in God who wages peace, even if we hone the discipline of relaxing, stopping, and being calm to lower the temperature of volatility, we know this does not guarantee that there will be no harm. Perhaps what the world needs from us is the non-anxious presence of a people who know that ultimately neither war nor weather will be the last word of our fate. If there is anyone still questioning whether "be still, and know that I am God," makes any difference in a brutal, violent world shaking and tottering and seeming to come apart before our very eyes, I invite you to consider that those words are placed in quotations. They are not the words of the singers; they are not original proclamations of my own exhorting you. "Be still and know that I am God" is the assurance of grace and refuge from God. Hear it again as divine assurance as you go out into the world: "Be still and know that I am God. I am with you."