

Pentecost A +21, Reformation
 October 29, 2017
 "Be Still and Know"
 Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
 David Noble

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. Selah*

*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; he utters his voice, the earth melts.
 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah*

*Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he 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. Selah*

1.

I have several favorite places in the world, and one of them is in Montreat, North Carolina. Montreat is a little town of 700 people just down the road from Asheville in the Appalachian Mountains, which already makes it scenic, just a few miles away from the Blue Ridge Parkway. My favorite place there is Montreat Conference Center, one of three national Presbyterian conference centers. You drive up the narrow winding road into the mountains, pass through the Montreat stone arch at the entrance and into a village that surrounds little Lake Susan. On one side of this little lake is a long conference center, on another is an art studio where you can throw pots and rent a canoe for the lake, and on another side is a dam that holds back the water of a little stream that creates Lake Susan in the middle of the retreat grounds. On all the hillsides there are homes and dormitories and classroom buildings for Montreat College. And rising above you at 3800 feet is the top of Graybeard Mountain, one of many hiking objectives in the 2500 acres of wilderness around the conference center.

I visited Montreat five or six times when my children were in elementary and junior high school. We went there to attend the national Presbyterian Peacemaking Conference along with a thousand other Presbyterians. We loved it. We made some friends, worshiped with a thousand people every day (wow the hymn singing!) and heard world class preaching. We took classes and went hiking and every night there was international dancing in the community center. It was a blast!

Among all these things I love, there was one place on those grounds that was extra special to me and to my little kids. At the bottom of the dam, the stream that had flowed into the lake on the other side, flowed out here over giant rocks and through quiet pools. It was a little stream.

In Pennsylvania we would call it a “creek.” Just a few feet wide and a few inches deep it was like a magnet for us. We spent every late shady afternoon there, climbing the rocks, finding fish and tadpoles and snakes, and chasing Jesus bugs (those little bugs that walk across the water).

Psalm 46 says there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the worried, anxious city of God. I know that feeling. I was glad to be visiting that little stream every day. I was finding peace and healing and hope. You see, I had just suffered through a difficult time, a divorce that had taken several years to unfold. My life, my family, was shaken to the core. I was praying on my knees for the first time. I was afraid and not in control. The unmovable mountains in my life had been rocked, the calm seas on which I had been traveling for years were suddenly roaring and foaming. And every summer when I came back to my little creek in the mountains I found rest, a new start, some hope. Beside this little stream I could be still and I could see God’s handiwork all around me. Somehow I felt the Lord of hosts was with me and I could carry on.

2.

Roaring seas and foaming waters have been all too familiar this past summer and fall, with Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria battering our shores. Millions of lives have been turned upside down, homes destroyed, communities devastated, loved ones lost. The Presbyterian Church committed itself to a ten year program to help victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. These recoveries will be even longer. And we’ve seen the fires in California that have killed and destroyed. And beyond our own communities there are millions in southern India who are leaving their farms because the air temperatures have been rising to unhealthy and unbearable new heights. To paraphrase Psalm 46, “Creation is in revolt.”

If only that was the end of it. But along with creation, the nations are in an uproar and are tottering at the edge of nuclear annihilation. I thought we left that behind 20 years ago. But here we are dancing on the edge of a sharp knife. John’s gospel calls it sin--this human tendency to do things our own way, sin--to rely on our own power, sinfulness--to make decisions based only on our thoughts and ideas. Sin is when God is left on the sidelines.

Maybe your life is turned upside down because of an unruly creation that has overturned your retirement plans in Florida or affected your families in the Islands. I know you have friends who are homeless because of the fires in California. Maybe you have a relationship that is strained and stretched or coming apart. Maybe you’re hurting in body or mind or spirit. Or maybe you just want to do things your own way, without following God’s leading, and you’re making your own little hurricanes.

3.

“Be still and know that I am God.”

How can you be still when everything is coming loose around you? How can you be calm and tranquil when life is throwing you this way and that? Is this a call to meditation? Is God suggesting we close our eyes and ignore what's happening around us? "Be still?" Be disconnected? Be passive? No.

No, God is not asking for that kind of stillness. "Be still and know that I am God." This stillness is about knowing. It's about emptying and filling. And that knowing and stillness is not just up here (head) but down here (hands and feet.)

Turn from the chaos toward God. Do not yield to the powers that threaten to overwhelm, but embrace the One who made you and who is your refuge. Resist anxiety even in the face of what threatens. This is an active, decisive, intentional "being still." We place our feet on what will not be moved. In the middle of danger we make a choice to grab onto the Lord of hosts who is with us. This is not sweet, submissive stillness. It is bold, deliberate, dynamic "taking a stand."

God is faithful. God is reliable and strong and present and working. Have courage. Don't shake, be still and stand with the One who helps.

Sounds like relationship to me. An investment of ourselves in a living connection with God.

4.

The world of the church is in chaos right now. We've talked about how churches are declining and closing at faster and faster rates. The Session talked about this last weekend at its retreat. The Christian Church has been trembling as our world has been changing and we have been left behind. What seemed to be mountains of tradition that would never move have been shaken.

Every time we stop and are still, whenever we pause to discern God's will- by that I mean when we ask God to enter into conversation with us and we listen and pray, and listen and pray, and listen and pray some more so we can see what God is leading us to do and be and say... Then we are being still in the midst of what can be fearful, and knowing that God is not only with us but for us.

Where is God? Where the winds are blowing at 150 mph, when the diagnosis is not what we had hoped for, on the seas that are frothing and foaming. That's where the God of hosts is with us.

What we're talking about here is resilience, how we deal with the threats and dangers and anxieties in our lives so they don't knock us down and keep us down. Maya Angelou says this about resilience:

"I'm not sure if resilience is ever achieved alone. Experience allows us to learn from example. But if we have someone who loves us...I don't mean who indulges us, but who loves us enough to be on our side...then it's easier to grow resilience, to grow belief in self, to grow self-esteem. And self-esteem allows a person to stand up." Resilience develops from the connections around us, the relationships. The relationship.

In the Reformation 500 years ago, Martin Luther rediscovered that truth, that God is on our side, that God wanted to be in relationship with Luther and with us all. So Luther was still, he did not shake in the face of powerful forces, he turned toward God who had already turned toward him, and he resisted the religious and social and political powers that struggled to control him. He reintroduced into the Christian faith the idea that God is present and with us, that God wants to be in relationship and not just an idea or a tradition, or a more enlightened way to live, but God wants to be known and held and trusted and consulted.

When life gets hard, "Know me," God says. Invite me in when and where it's tough. Know my grace by living it in "graceless" situations. Know my love by sharing it with the unlovable. Know my reconciliation by reconciling with those from whom you are estranged. Know my peace by making peace with those who oppose you. Do not shake, but be still in the presence of the Lord. With God's presence in you, with the example of Christ before you, you will be transformed and resilient and brave.

And then a creek of hope and mercy and grace, a stream of defiant resistance to anxiety and whatever worries, and a river of peace straight from God, will flow through you and into the chaotic, dangerous, upside down world around you.

Be still and be filled with God's presence. And do not fear.