

“Be Still and Know”
Psalm 46

We begin today a sermon series with a focus on the power of deep stillness to transform our lives and our world. We are faced each day with a multitude of choices and challenges. Our world is always on the move and we are expected to move even at a much faster pace today just to keep up. Yet, the faster we move, the more stuck we seem to get; stuck in our fears, our violence, our conflicts, our struggles, our grudges, our self-doubt, our pride, our repetitive thoughts, our destructive behaviors, and our cruelty. Consider the situation in Syria this week and our government’s decision to bomb Syria on Friday when the UN inspectors were set to arrive on Saturday to Syria to inspect the situation. Why couldn’t our president wait? What was the rush? It seems that the pressure was on him to show strength by acting, even before confirming the evidence and even after knowing that bombing the Middle East does not bring us any closer to solving the issues at hand. That is why we will focus in worship on the power of stillness, not as an escape from the world and its challenges, but as a way to engage life deeply and with our whole being.

Faith has a lot to teach us about this kind of deep living, but it is also amazing when I see other groups of people teaching the same kind of wisdom. Last year, I learned about Slow TV which is basically an uninterrupted broadcast of an ordinary event from start to finish. Here is an ad about watching Slow TV: <https://youtu.be/hXMtC8Kj-sQ>

It is pretty amazing to have that experience of watching something so slow that it helps you calm down. Another example comes from Cal Newport’s 2016 book *Deep Work*. The premise of the book is simple, yet powerful and life-changing: Focus on what you are doing and let go of distractions and your productivity and happiness will increase. Newport uses the term “deep work” to describe this kind of focus. Checking your email every few minutes while trying to work on something else slows your brain down. Newport learned from a professor about the importance of deep work.

Through science, Newport discovered the concept of attention residue. When we are trying to do something and get interrupted or switch to another task, our brains don’t immediately switch gears 100%. A part of our brain stays focused on the first task we were engaged in. It takes our brains a while before we can fully switch to the new task. That attention residue deprives us from getting the best performance out of our brains. Some jobs require a higher level of switching from task to the next. But most jobs and most tasks in life are best served when we focus on one project more deeply. Newport writes, “To produce at your peak level you need to work for extended periods with full concentration on a single task free from distraction.”

In a way, that is what faith teaches us about life and our presence in the world. If we want to live life to its fullest potential, we have to be fully present to each and every moment, and not just with our minds, but also with our hearts and souls. In order to engage life and its challenges with the power of God’s love in us, we have to be fully present. That is what Psalm 46 was about to the people of Israel.

Psalm 46 is a great poem about God's care for all of creation and human history, especially in difficult times. When the challenges are great, that is exactly when we need to slow down and focus on God's presence. We need to center our hearts in God's love instead of being thrown around by all that comes our way. The words of this psalm give us the reassurance that God is present with us and in every part of life even in the most troubling times. There is no time or circumstance where God is not present. So, the invitation is not to ask for God's presence and care because that's already there. The invitation is for us to be still and to know. The New American Standard Version translates the Hebrew word, *rapha*, into "cease striving" instead of "be still." I remember when I first learned to swim and how the key was to just let go and to float. The key was not to tense up and flail like I wanted to because my fear of drowning was so overwhelming. Instead, I had to learn to be intentional about each move while using my deep sense of trust that the water will carry me if I relaxed and let go. Instead of fighting against the water, I learned to flow with it. This is an important theme in the Bible where the people of God had to learn time and again to stop their striving and to trust in God. This does not mean inaction. Instead, it means acting out of sense of trust in God even when worldly wisdom calls us to strive and do something different. There is a long list of biblical figures who had to learn to let go of their striving and to join God's flow of love:

- Jacob and his striving to get a special place
- The ancient Israelites in the wilderness and how they had to learn to trust God in providing for their daily food
- Jonah learning to trust God by going to Nineveh, the place he hated
- The three famous kings of Israel: Saul, David, and Solomon and how they struggled with trusting God
- Peter who denied Jesus at the hour of greatest need
- Paul who persecuted the followers of Jesus because he was trying to defend his faith
- The early church when they struggled with opening the mission of Jesus to those outside of the Jewish faith

And the list goes on! So many people struggle the same way. Our ways of struggle are ever changing, but the fact is that we always struggle. So the invitation to remain still is not just about sitting down and being quiet. It is a call for a deeper kind of quiet, an inner peace that stops our striving both inwardly and outwardly. It is about our flowing with the Spirit of God and flow of life. The Hebrew word for "know" in verse 10 is also a significant word for us. The word *yada* indicates a deeper kind of knowledge. It is not a knowledge that comes only from the head. It is a total kind of knowledge that is in the body, heart, mind and soul of a person. Then, to make this even a more complete picture for us, we are invited to cease striving and to know holistically that God is. The phrase "that I am God," is reminiscent of God's encounter with Moses in the burning bush when Moses asked God about God's name and the response was, "I am who I am" in Exodus 3:14. It is put in the present tense because God exists in the present moment, in the eternal now. So, it is an invitation to know God right now as God is right here in this moment of time, not only in past events of history or in the future predictions

of the prophets. Knowing God that intimately and closely with our bodies, hearts, minds and souls only happens in the present moment. Deep living is about being intentional about our being and not just about what we do. How we breathe, how we take time to look someone in the eye, and how to pay attention and be present to God in the midst of a struggle are all part of the way we can be still and know that God is with us.

Psalms were not spoken to a group of people who had not had trouble. In fact, the opposite was true. Most of the Psalms were written during the exile, which was historically one of the toughest experiences the people of Israel had. They were taken over by the Babylonians and then uprooted from their homes. Yet, in the midst of it all, they were invited to know that all the evil in the world had no power in the face of God's loving presence. The powers of evil are going to even be still and know that God is there.

And so today the invitation is before us to take this challenge of stillness very seriously as a way to transform us and the world. In his very book *The Life You've Always Wanted*, Pastor John Ortberg makes the following observation: "Hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life in our day . . . for many of us the great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it...American society is rich in goods, it is extremely time poor. Many societies in the two-thirds world by contrast are poor in material possessions by our standards but they are rich in time. They are not driven or hurried. They live with the sense that there's adequate time to do what needs to be done each day."

I invite you this week to start using the devotional booklet "Be Still" by Jacob Armstrong. Make time each day to begin the day with a reflection. Instead of running out to the next busy thing or reading/watching the news, take time to spend some quality time in quiet with God. It will change everything for the rest of your day! When trouble comes your way, as it normally does, you will be at your best knowing that you are not alone. It is on our church's website at www.fpcbatavia.org.

We will use one of the devotions from the first day for our ending. We will center ourselves by focusing on our breathing and closing our eyes. Then as we listen to the scripture read a couple of times, we are invited to pay attention to how God is speaking to us right now:

"God is...an ever-present help in trouble." (repeated twice)

Let God speak to you about how this verse is related to your life or to our world right now.

Prayer: Thank you God for this time that we could share together. May the stillness and peace of these moments carry over into the movement of our days. Amen.