

Be Still
Psalm 46
10/4/15
Randy Lovelace

What does it mean to be still and know that I am God? Let's turn to the Psalm. It is Psalm 46, and if you have your Bibles you can turn there. Here is Psalm 46. And then I will have a companion reading—a brief passage from Luke chapter 10, both of which ask the question: what does it mean to be still before God? Which requires us to be able to make a good choice between that which is good, and that which is better. So let's look at Psalm 46.

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. *Selah*

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends 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 will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

And now a reading from Luke chapter 10—Jesus stopping by the home where Mary and Martha are.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." [Luke 10:38-42]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord, I pray that you would help us to learn, even briefly, what it means to be still. For we confess, we live in a very hurried age. In many ways, we count ourselves lucky that we're so in the know. There's so much going on—so many good things, so many things to pay attention to. And yet, we ask, what is the better thing, Lord? What does it mean to be still? Give us wisdom, we pray, to live in the world but not of it—to pay attention to you, to find refuge and strength in you. So help us. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

You can only imagine—of course, it's recounted for us in a painting of the Lord's supper—the last supper, as it is called. You wonder, with all that had been going on during the time in which Jesus was sharing this last supper with his disciples—you wonder—of course, it's not always recorded for us in the Scriptures—I mean, was it really a peaceful meal? Particularly after Jesus shares what's getting ready to happen to him, the many thoughts that must have been shooting through their minds. And yet, he still

offered them a very simple meal. There was a gift of bread and of wine—regardless of what was going through their minds, and regardless of what he had just said, and what had been going on in their minds as a result was getting ready to take place the next day—he still thought it enough that there was something in that moment, in the givenness of peace in that room, to take the opportunity to share bread, to break it, and to give them that bread, and to give them that cup, and say to them, “Guess what? You’re to continue to celebrate this meal until I return.” Something important there. And at each major juncture after that point, he still shows up to them in his resurrection body in meals. All the stuff that was going on in their minds after his death, yet he still thought it important to reveal himself in a meal.

So he’s revealing himself to us in this meal, and he’s inviting us to do something—take this bread and take this cup. What he’s calling us to do is to find refuge in him. This is what the psalmist is talking about, just briefly. He says, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” And then he also recounts how the Lord is himself like a stream that makes glad the city of God. He talks about the holy place where the Most High dwells. He is within her. And he says, “She will not fall.”

And so what he does is he contrasts the Lord being a refuge and strength, and the Lord being a stream that makes glad the city of God. And around this refuge and around this city of God are a couple of things. Around God who is a refuge, the world seems to be upheaval in nature. Though he is within the temple walls, he is a God who is a help to her at the break of day. The nations are in uproar. But then almost just passingly, the psalmist says, kingdoms fall. They come and they go. But God is everlasting.

And then he says, “The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come and see the works of the LORD.” And then he contrasts that with the fact that the Lord will be our great Warrior-King. He will protect his people. Though nations will rise up against him, they will not be victorious. He will break the bow. He will shatter the spear. His anger and wrath will be so powerful, the shields of warriors who come up against the Lord—their shields will be melted, the psalmist tells us.

And then after all of this upheaval both in the natural world, around the city of God, though the nations will come against him—amidst all of this, the psalm ends with just almost a Psalm 23 placid moment: “Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” Remember, the nations and the earth were in upheaval just a few verses before, and yet our warrior sovereign King says in the midst of all of it, “I’m your refuge and strength. I will be with you. I will shatter the one who comes against you.” But then at the end of history, it says, “I will be exalted.” Foreshadowing what Paul would say to us: “Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess in heaven and on earth that Jesus Christ is Lord.” And then he says, “The Lord is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

What is beautiful about the Psalm is, he calls us to find stillness and rest not in a place of stillness and rest, but in the midst of great turmoil and trouble and opposition and difficulty, where the earth itself seems to be warring against us. It’s in that place that the Lord is our refuge. Where is it that the Lord gives us a stream that makes glad the city of God? It is in the midst not of a nice, watered garden place of quiet—rather, it is in the midst of the fact that the nations seem to be warring against the people of God. It is in that place that the Lord says, “I will be a river that makes glad the city of God.”

So it isn’t that the people of God are to go and find a place that is completely protected, away from the world, away from all the craziness, and there we will find a place to be still and know that He is God—no. It seems the real call is to find that God is our refuge and strength, to be still and know that He is God, when everything around us seems to be blowing up. Now that is crazy. How do you do with everything blowing up around you? Is that a place where you think, “Okay, I need to stop right here and be still and know that He is God”? I find that incredibly difficult. How about you? I want to go away into a closet, find a place, turn off the phone, turn off all the noise, and then find that place to be still and know that He is God. The challenge is when the phone and the email and the texts and all the expectations and all the to-do lists and everything that’s on your brain, everything that has you—the water level’s right here, and

your nose is like right there—you know? It's there that the challenge is, how can I be still and know that he is not just God—he is the Sovereign God, and he's got all of this. I struggle with that. Do you?

I struggle with being able to find stillness, because instead of being able to find stillness in the midst of all the craziness, I must confess to you that I like to give myself to the craziness. The phone is always with me. People have my number. Just email me. Just text me. Message me. Always available. Always on. Always connected. Because that's what I'm supposed to be, right? But somehow, I've been duped. And I'm assuming I'm not the only one here. I've been duped into thinking if I'm able to find a way to attend to that which is calling me to attention—if I'm able to order my life in such a way to find a way to deal with all the chaos—there the stillness will be. As opposed to being able to say, let the phone ring, let the emails come, let the texts come, let the messages come, and therein ask, "Lord, will you be my refuge?"

You see, the one way wants to turn to my own gifts, my own ability to try to be like a squirrel finding a lot of nuts and squirreling them away, trying to take care of it all, getting ready for the fall that's coming. I can run really fast. But am I finding my refuge in the Lord? Or am I simply being drawn in to the zeitgeist—to the spirit of the age?

You see, in this story of Mary and Martha, it is remarkable—first of all—that there's a story about two women. But the story really isn't about the two women, you see. But it is remarkable at all that this story is just about two women—that Jesus would choose this moment to tell us something about choosing between that which is good and that which is better. It isn't that there isn't preparation. It isn't that there aren't emails to be responded to, or texts to attend to, or calls to make, or to-do lists to give ourselves to. All those things are good and right, and we can't escape all of that. But it seems there is a place that Jesus is saying—in the midst of all of that craziness—to ask, "Lord, let me ask you as my refuge and my strength—to be still and ask you, what is the better thing in this moment?" I find it hard, don't you, to ask "what is the better thing to do"? It's easier to say, what is the louder thing that's calling me to attention? And I'll attend to that. Or am I the only one? Okay. I don't think I'm the only one. All right.

So let me share with you a brief reflection and then tie this all up. One excellent writer is a man named Andy Crouch. Andy is the managing editor of *Christianity Today*—perhaps one of their best they've ever had. And he went on a sabbatical this past spring with his wife. And they decided to, during lent, travel to Italy and to some cities in Italy and in Europe. He decided, however, that what he would do in preparation for and during, is he would give himself to a digital fast. He did have a phone with him, so it wasn't a complete fast. He just took off of his phone all apps except for his phone app so his wife could actually connect with him in the event that they were lost, and some kind of messaging app so they could do the same thing. But everything else, he put away.

And he was wanting to ask himself the question: what does it mean to be still and know that He is God? What does it mean to choose the better thing and not just always just the good things that are calling us to attention? In no way, shape, or form was he saying screens are bad, or stay away from the internet, or don't do email. That wasn't the point of his reflection. But here's what he discovered during his fast from his digital life. Let me read a brief portion of this, because I found it to be very helpful. He says:

There is a lot of talk about the ways our devices are distracting us, and that is certainly true. Having spent several weeks away from it all, I'm a bit aghast at how much buzzing and blinking, how many notifications and messages, how much unasked-for stimulation, I've let creep into my life over the past few years. But there's something deeper than just the sheer variety and urgency of data that presents itself to us. The issue is not just cognitive. The deeper danger of our screens, I am coming to think, is flattery.

Our screens, increasingly, pay a great deal of attention to us. They assure us that someone, or at least something, cares. The mediated world constantly falls over itself to tell us, often

in entirely automated ways, that we matter every bit as much as we secretly hope we do. They tell us we are liked, retweeted, favorited—that we are significant, useful, and urgently needed. Every generation of devices gets better at this, becomes less a persnickety, recalcitrant technician (does anyone remember the exacting syntax of command-line interfaces?) and more and more an utterly dedicated, ingratiating concierge for our preferred future.

He says, simply, that they love to flatter us. And then he contrasts this. He says:

The unmediated world does not flatter us in this way. Stand on a deserted seashore and the creation pays you no evident attention, except perhaps for a few creatures that alter their paths to keep a safe distance. Even our fellow human beings rarely flatter us with the attention we think we deserve. Walk down a street in Hong Kong or Phnom Penh or London or Rome, and unless you are young and beautiful, or possibly rich, no one will pay you the slightest heed. And youth and beauty, even wealth, are fleeting things. I never was beautiful, but I have had some success, enough to know that even at the heights of attention, when the whole room is looking at you, smiling at you, standing and applauding you, the overwhelming experience of life as a human being is smallness and disregard. There is a hunger for attention that all the selfies in the world will never fill, a hunger that only grows as our mediated world breathlessly offers more and more ways to call attention to ourselves.

One of the things that Andy Crouch came to the conclusion of—though he doesn't enumerate it in this reflection—I have done so, as a result. There is no doubt in my mind that the way in which we give ourselves in attention to many good things, often illuminated things, is what it means to live in the modern world. And they do flatter us. And they do it in automated ways. It isn't that those things are always bad. But if we are not giving attention to it very easily, this begins to train us—the blinks, the flashes, the buzzes—the need to be available is training us. But the question is, is it training us to be still and know that He is God, or is it simply training us to learn how to deal with all the chaos? We can get more and more apps. We can even get off Facebook. But the reality in the modern world is, we have to attend to a lot of these things.

The question is, what is the good thing for us to do, and what is the better thing? If Christ came to his disciples after telling them whatever they had known with him is getting ready to radically change—really alter—in ways they could not even imagine, that in fact they were rejecting—that what was getting ready to happen to him is he was getting ready to die on a cross at the hands of their enemies for the sake of the sin of the world. And then on the third day he was raised again from the dead, victorious over sin and death. And he told them what he was going to do, how he was going to do it, when he was going to do it. And yet they still said, "Absolutely not." And when all the chaos came up on that next day, they all but left him in the dust. Had they heard the psalm? Surely they had. Had they witnessed? They were with him when he was instructing Mary and Martha.

The disciples struggled with what is better and what is good, just as we do. But Jesus meets us this evening in this meal, to call us again to a place of refuge—the refuge of his life and death and resurrection—the refuge in saying, He is the one who meets us in the midst of our hurried, distracted, overly-concentrated-on-all-the-things-happening lives. And he calls us and says, "Be still and know that I am God." All these things, yes, will call us, and we must attend to many of them—but in the midst of them, what defines you is not always what is screaming at you the loudest, or that the world may feel like it's coming apart at the seams. Know that in the midst of your trouble, in the midst of your distractions, in the midst of opposition, I am God. And in the end, be still, He says, and know that I am God. In fact, He says, I am the Lord Almighty. He is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. The Lord came down in the midst of a lot of turmoil to bring peace. In the midst of our turmoil, may the Lord enable us by his Spirit as he gives us grace tonight to ask, "Lord, what is the better thing? Help me to find refuge in you."