

BE STILL!

A sermon by Joe Hoffman

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I stand before you today wondering what it is that I might say. What are the right words for today. And I come back to the same place I have come over and over again in my life. The right words are found only in seeking God and asking God to speak through me. Through all of us. They are not words for me to manufacture. Not words for me to manipulate or create. The right words come when I trust with confidence the presence of God.

Psalm 46 begins like this:

The Beloved is our refuge and strength.

A loving presence in times of trouble.

I have always believed in the strength of God, even though I don't believe that God is all powerful in the sense that God will come and change our troubles into good times. I have seen it too many times when earthquakes and hurricanes, floods and tornados have ripped through the land and destroyed homes, taken lives, and in general caused havoc and chaos that endures for years. A few years ago there were those televangelists and fundamentalist preachers who claimed that Hurricane Katrina was God's judgment on New Orleans for allowing a gay pride march to take place. But would God do such a thing? Would God kill children and families and dogs and cats out of anger? Not the God I know and trust.

No, even though God does not stop such disasters, my notion of God is that God is indeed a loving presence in times of trouble. God has created the world as it is, Earth and Universe operate in their own rhythms of life and death, of scarcity and abundance. We are part of all that is. Part of the circle of life. And faith is not to change what is, but to learn to live in the strength and refuge of God in the midst of what is. And God will be, God is, with us. Nothing else matters except that. God is with us.

God is with us in the face of war and violence. God is with us even when we are the aggressor, when we are the ones doing the killing and hurting. God is with us not to encourage us to be violent, but to call us back to trust in God's way. To put down our weapons of destruction. And when we are the ones suffering from the violence, God is with us as well. Loving us. Holding us. Not taking away our troubles, but giving us strength to endure in the arms of God's embrace.

God is with us in the midst of disease and helplessness. When the word comes from the doctor that our loved one has cancer, God is there with us to help us carry the fear. When the phone call comes in the middle of the night, and we answer, having no idea who is calling but knowing that middle of the night calls are almost never good news, God is with us as we pick up the phone and say hello. God is with us when we send our children off to school for the first time, praying they will be safe; God is with us when we do anything and everything – even when we have taken off to a distant land to squander our inheritance – God is with us.

Martin Luther, back in the late 15th and early 16th century, protested the practices of the Catholic Church. He protested that the church would not make the Bible available to the common person, and thus the church leaders would interpret for the people what they should know. And that interpretation seemed to be an act of manipulation to Luther. He finally erupted into action when a Dominican monk tried to sell indulgences to his poor students at Wittenburg, Germany. The money was going to build St. Peter's Church in Rome – not to help those who were poor and hungry. His protest led him to nail his 95 thesis on the Wittenburg door to open a debate, but instead he unknowingly created the Protestant Reformation. He used this Psalm 46 as the basis of his very famous hymn – A Mighty Fortress is Our God, which we will sing in a few moments. Hymns like this have held me over the years when I wondered where in the world God was in the midst of trouble. But the witness of these words reminded me –

“And though this world with devils filled

Should threaten to undo us.

We will not fear for God has willed the truth to triumph through us.

The powers of evil grim, we tremble not for them;

Their rage we can endure, for lo, their doom is sure.

One little word shall fell them.”

I have clung to these words all my life. I see the evidence to this truth as I remember how those in the civil rights movement were inspired as they sang “We Shall Overcome, and we are not afraid – even as they knew that some of them would be attacked and killed. Their fear was not in that which was earthly, but in the ultimate refuge of God. And yet, they also believed that their witness to truth would someday bring forth God's justice.

God is our refuge and strength, a loving Presence in times of 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 tumult

The nations may be at war, countries left in ruins,

Yet is the voice of the Almighty heard, melting hearts of stone.

The Beloved is with us, the infinite Heart of Love.

Come behold the works of the Beloved

How love does reign even in humanity's desolation.

For the Beloved makes wars to cease, breaking through the barriers of fear,

Shattering the greedy and oppressors, refining hearts of iron.

God calls on those who make war to cease. God calls on those who oppress and do violence to stop. God is always trying to open a door to our hearts and inviting us to give up our weapons of whatever sort we have. God sent Moses to Pharaoh to say – let my people go. Ten times Moses went, and ten times Pharaoh said no. In the midst of all the effort, the people were enslaved, treated harshly, unfairly. But there is no equal to God. No power stronger. Not Pharaoh, not our military industrial complex, not sickness or death. God continues to call us to be free.

And no matter what happens to us, no matter how many troubles we know, we are called to trust in this God who is faithful. In this God who loves us and cares for us. Who loves the rich young ruler who just can't let go of all the stuff that gets in the way of living in God's way. Who loves the weeds that grow amidst the wheat. Who loves you and me with all the secrets and all the mistakes and all the whatever there is that is part of our lives. Who loves the drug addict on the streets, the prostitute on the corner of the road, the one who cannot pay their bills and the one who gets rich preying on the poor and vulnerable. God's Love is a power that wants to empower us. God's Love has the power to change all that is not just, and in the midst of natural disaster – God's love is the power that carries us together.

The Beloved is our refuge and strength, a loving Presence in times of trouble.

And God will say: Be still! And know that I am God. Know that I am Love. These words were not intended in the context of this psalm to be what we often think they are – calm, quiet, soothing words. They were a shout. A command. Be still. Stop what you are doing. Desist your evil ways. Know that I am God. Nothing you do, nothing that happens to you can overpower my Love for you. Nothing. Be still!

I had a professor in graduate school that told of a woman, a student at the school before I came, who was plagued by her own demons. She had tried psycho therapy. She had tried drugs. She had prayed. She had asked everyone she knew for help. She was so frustrated, and the whole community with her for she, in her struggles, was a nuisance. No one knew how to help. Everyone was tired of trying.

And then, one day, this professor, as this woman ranted in his office about her life and her struggles, this professor looked at her and suddenly felt the rage roar inside of him, and he yelled out – Stop this now! Let this woman be free!”

He was surprised by his own voice. The woman also was stunned. They both sat in silence for a moment, and then the woman began to weep. She got up quietly and thanked the professor, and left. And from that moment on, her life was different. The professor did not know where this had come from in himself, and felt a bit embarrassed. And yet, the voice came from beyond him, and the woman walked out a free person.

That is the nature of this “Be still.” It is a command to stop being afraid, to stop being one who terrorizes others, to stop acting as if you are powerless. And so Martin Luther protested the abuses of the Catholic Church and eventually gave the Bible to the people with his new translation. Civil rights workers held hands and sang – we are not afraid, and walked into the face of their oppressors time and again. Those who are sick with cancer or disease refuse to give up their spirit to that which would try to take away their lives, but instead live each moment trusting that whatever comes, God is with them. Those who face the destruction of war or natural disaster refuse to give in to the chaos all around them – but call forth the strength of God’s love to empower them for their particular time and situation. Those who are afraid refuse to be afraid, and they hold onto hope and live with the knowledge that God is God.

Be still and know that I am God, that I am Love

I am exalted among the nations

I am exalted in the earth!

The One who knows all hearts is with us.

The Beloved is our refuge and strength.

Let us have courage my friends. Let us trust in the power of God. Trust in the love of God in us and around us. Live in the hope that God is with us and will never abandon us. That is the core of our faith. That is what we celebrate as we come to this table. God is with us. We are not alone. Not even with our anguish and grief. Thanks be to God.