

September 10, 2023 Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Psalm 46

"Resilience: Practice Mindfulness"

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She was frantic, already five minutes late for her zoom meeting. And where the heck were her glasses? There was no purpose in being on the meeting if she could not read the spreadsheets. What kind of idiot cannot keep track of something as simple as a pair of glasses, she muttered to herself. She scrambled from room to room, overturning couch cushions, tossing aside magazines and children's toys. Finally, she collapsed on the couch, whispered an expletive she hoped her children could not hear and exhaled a long, slow sigh. In that moment of stillness she felt a slight weight upon her head. Yep, she reached up, and there perched upon her forehead were her glasses. Yes, I am an idiot, but an idiot with glasses, she thought to herself. And being gifted with a clarity of vision, she went on to her meeting.

Today is the first in a four-sermon series on traits that provide us with resilience. Number one, practice mindfulness. Number two, recognizing that every setback offers a transformation. Number three, finding humor in everything. Number four, understanding we cannot control our lives.

With the myriad of pressures and responsibilities life places upon us, it is not a question of whether we will have a moment when we feel defeated and overwhelmed by life. The question before us is how we will respond when those moments occur. Will we have the elasticity of Spirit to bounce back?

Will we have the wherewithal to recover and pivot; to adapt to the circumstances before us? These are questions for each of us and for our call to be the church together.

As we turn to the first trait of resilience, practicing mindfulness, I am immediately drawn to the 46th Psalm. This has always been such an important psalm for me because the hardest thing in the world for me to do is to be mindful. Being mindful means be completely present in the moment and consciously aware of what is going on both around oneself and within oneself. Too often, my hyper-neurotic mind is pin-balling around a vast variety of concerns leaving little quiet space for being present and aware in the moment. That is why the line from verse ten of Psalm 46 is consistently an inspiration and an indictment. "Be still and know that I am God."

But the psalm does not speak solely of calm and quiet. The psalm opens with a vivid portrait of trouble. When the psalmist speaks of the mountains shaking and trembling, we need to know what mountains represented in the ancient worldview. Mountains were envisioned as the anchors which allowed the dry land to stay put in the midst of the waters of the world which represent chaos. As well, mountains were seen as pillars which kept the sky aloft. A shaking mountain was akin to threatening to pull out the main supporting beam in a building, the whole enterprise is at risk for collapse.

The psalmist does not avoid the reality that at times the things we think of as foundational in our lives can be at peril. Pandemic, natural disasters, intense political discord, global economic instability have all been reminders we have shared that there are few guarantees in this world of how life has to be. We also experience foundation-shaking moments that belong solely

to ourselves, a physical illness, a failed marriage, the loss of a job. Sometimes there is no outward sign at all but depression or anxiety grab a hold of us and our foundations are shaken.

God's refuge and strength do not promise immunity from the shaking of what we think of as foundations. The divine fortress does not box out the potential tragedies of this life. But although no guarantee of immunity is offered, we are given specific instructions on how to respond.

What are we called to do when the world appears to be collapsing around us? "Be still and know that I am God." It is a counter cultural lesson to say the least. When most of us are faced with a shaking of the foundations our first reaction is quick and responsive action. Earthquake? Get to a door jam and cover your head. Lose a job? Polish the resume and jump onto LinkedIn. Significant health diagnosis? Get a second opinion and explore treatment options.

When there is a crisis, the first reaction is always to do something, anything in response. And that "anything" does not usually entail being still. Frankly, being still is one of the last things many of us wish to do in any circumstance. But it does remind me of the line from Rudyard Kipling, "if you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs..." One of those grand visions that is hard to fulfill in a moment of crisis.

But we are not called to simply keep our heads and be still. We are called to be still and know who God is. We are being called to remember who is in charge of this entire operation, who is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all of existence.

Our limitations as mortals leave us with a limiting view of reality, we are like ants on the sidewalk, there is so much we do not see and comprehend. We view reality by the immediate surfaces presented to us. And what is immediately before us at times can be shaken and we can easily believe that the foundations of all that is are at stake, like some little ant having a stone placed before it. It is akin to being in a boat on the ocean, the surface may be tumultuous, tossing us to and fro, but what lies beneath, in the depths, is calm and still and firmly in place.

When we remember that God is in charge, a God who loves us deeply enough to die for us is in charge, we know that the waves tossing us to and fro may be shaking us but not shaking the foundation below. The obstacles before us, though large in our eyes, are not insurmountable in God's sight.

The presence of God in the temple did not guarantee that Jerusalem would not fall. The presence of God in Jesus did not guarantee that suffering and death would not befall him and his disciples. But God is indeed our refuge and our strength and a very present help in trouble. Though what we see as foundations may be shaken, the foundational promises of God's love for us and our destination in God will not, cannot be shaken. If we allow ourselves to be reminded of that in the midst of the chaos around us, we can indeed be still. And in that stillness, we can practice mindfulness. We can be present in the moment to all that surrounds us, and all that is within us. We can be resilient to whatever may come for we are indeed surrounded and inhabited by the divine in every moment. It is not our resilience upon which we need to rely but upon God's Spirit lifting us up and guiding us forward.

As we came out of the depths of the pandemic there was much

talk of returning to normal in each of our lives, in our society, and in the church. But the world never goes completely back to what it once was. It evolves. It shifts, perhaps in subtle ways, perhaps in significant ways. Our faithful response to such changes starts not with anxiety over change but in a still quiet focus upon the changeless promises of our God.

We can scurry to and fro all we want, overturning our self-confidence and tossing the elements of our lives around, and miss the sight of our God in our midst. Or we can find a moment of stillness, discover the glasses upon our very heads, and receive a clarity of vision, allowing us to recognize the one who is present in all times and all places.

A poem by Rainer Marie Rilke:

"All this hurrying
soon will be over.
Only when we tarry
do we touch the holy."

Be still, my friends, be still.

Thanks be to God. Amen.