

**Sermon: September 6, 2020. Psalm 46.
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Watch at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dC3Dk4Q4E0>

“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”. (Psalm 46: 1-3) What a dramatic beginning to our Psalm today, and to our month-long journey in the season of creation.

The Psalmist draws these terrifying pictures from nature, saying that even if such things should happen, God will still be present and accessible – and that’s reassuring to hear in the early 21st century, as mountains are, in a way, falling into the heart of the sea, with Greenland losing some 280 billion tons of ice into the ocean in a typical year. Even when this is happening, God is present to us, urging us toward more sustainable ways of being. Later, (in verse 9) the Psalmist brings forward another set of images, this one from the world of domination and war rather than the world of nature, stating “God makes wars cease to the ends of the earth...breaks the bow and shatters the spear...burns the shields with fire.” In times of war and warring intent, God’s will is just as fervently oriented toward peace. U of C Professor Peter Craigie, in a wonderful commentary on the Psalms written not long before his death, pointed out that in both these examples, God is the one who brings order out of chaos. Just as God was described in the creation story of Genesis 1 as the one who brought order out of chaos, God continues to be the one who brings order from chaos in our day, whether the forces of chaos being confronted are the disastrous effects of earthquakes and hurricanes, or the intentional creation of social chaos by, let’s say, a handful of dangerous narcissists who have risen to global power.

Whether the chaos and suffering are of human or natural origin, the Psalm, in verse 10 calls us to step back from our fears: “Be still, and know that I am God.” I find it almost impossible to say those words, and launch into additional words, so let’s hear them again. “Be still, and know that I am God.”

When we are still, we relearn what we already know: God is present. God is loving. God IS. When the tasks and the noise and the distractions and the worry are silenced, even for a moment, there is stillness...and in that stillness, is God.

One of the great gifts of our Judaeo-Christian tradition, is the concept of sabbath. This was such an important thing to our Jewish forebears, that it was woven into the stories of the origins of all that is: God was busy with the tasks of creation of six days, and on the seventh day, God rested. This insistence on sabbath rest was mirrored in the ten commandments, with the insistence that on the seventh day we would rest. In many Bible stories, Jesus withdraws from a time of high demand, to be alone with God and be re-filled.

Sabbath found its way into Jewish agricultural practices, with the seventh year being a fallow year for the land and a rest year for the farmer; it found its way into their economic system, with every seventh year designated as a year when debts between neighbours were forgiven; and at the end of seven cycles of seven was a special year when slaves and prisoners would be freed, lands returned, and, again, debts forgiven, known as the year of Jubilee.

Each year in September, Churches around the world observe a special “season of creation” or “creation time,” with a specific theme set for that year’s observance. This year, the international committee has outdone themselves, naming “Jubilee for the Earth: new rhythms, new hope” as the theme. Although it wasn’t anyone’s plan at the beginning of 2020, the worldwide slowdown of industry and travel has given this dear planet a momentary chance to catch its breath, a year of Jubilee when it is, for a moment at least, not enslaved to human whims. Earth has been able to be still and, I daresay, experience God once more, and my fervent prayer is that we don’t just slide back into pushing this planet as hard as we can as we scramble to get economies re-

launched, going back to our ways of over-consumption. In this time of stillness, Earth can breathe again and we need *that* to continue.

Stillness also invites our souls to fullness of life. As you have likely noticed, whether it's on the trail or just sitting outside, when it's been windy and then it isn't... when stillness is a thing... we start to notice sounds that had been obscured before – birds singing, insects chirping, fish and amphibians splashing, rodents and reptiles moving through grass. Some of that will simply be that these quieter sounds no longer have so much competition, so we can hear them better, but in the stillness there may also be an increase in activity by the wee creatures of the world. In those surroundings, my sense of awe tends to increase, and so does my sense of interconnectedness. When things are still, I notice my surroundings more, and I am more likely to still myself enough to stop being the big galumphing mammal roaming across these lands, and even for a moment, pause and notice industrious ants, or foraging chipmunks. When I let stillness take me over, I am more at one with my surroundings, with myself, with my God. When I release my agenda, my preoccupations and distractions, I allow God to whisper and point me toward those things I would have missed on my own. In the midst of stillness, I am re-integrated with the foundations of my life, and the foundations of the earth, and my identity as a child of God.

In this month-long season of creation, this is such an important concept for us. So many people, the Spiritual and the Religious and those who are neither, talk about how “at home” they feel in nature. If they use God language, the back country is where they meet God. Each person will have their own way to express where this resides for them, but I turn to Father Richard Rohr and his writings on the Universal Christ (p.58): “The radiance of the Divine Presence has been glowing and expanding since the beginning of time, before there were any human eyes to see or know about it... Creation – be it planets, plants, or pandas – was not just a warm-up act for the human story or the Bible. The natural world is its own good and sufficient story, if we can only learn to see it with humility and love. That takes contemplative practice, stopping our busy and superficial minds long enough to see the beauty, allow the truth, and protect the inherent goodness of what it is.” In the stillness of contemplation, in the stillness of sabbath, in the stillness of nature, we find a God who has been present all along, to all creation and in all creation, but whose presence we have obscured by things that are louder, more demanding, more entertaining, seemingly more important.

In these months of lessened mobility, when we have been at home a lot more, many have found fertile ground for being still, and going deep with God. If that has been the case for you, God bless you! – and I hope you will share some of those insights as our Wednesday night Evensong resumes later this month. Alas, it's not really been that for me, or for many clergy. My great friend, Rev David Robertson in High River, knows a lot about what it is to function in a state of alarm, having lived through the devastating power of the 2013 floods, and he has shared his wisdom with the wider Church. When we are in a state of alarm, he says, all manner of things may happen. Anxiety rises, concentration and short-term memory may be challenged, compulsions and addictions and cognitive distortions have a field day. Energy is depleted, sleep patterns disturbed, and if we add in the habit known as “doom-scrolling” – going onto social media or the news channels and engaging one alarming story after another – then we may feel simultaneously agitated and helpless and far too responsible for it all. Some of the remedies he suggests, are these:

- “pray, meditate, be quiet...every day, even twice a day... Stay connected with the Holy.
- “slow yourself down. Do what you can, and don't worry about what you can't.
- “bring play into your life. Laugh...Dance. Make music. Go outside, sit in the sun.”

Or in other words, “be still, and know that I am God.” Engage the ancient gift of sabbath, a gift needed by each one of us, and for the planet we live on. Engage the brokenness of the world,

but release the worthless, fretting anxiousness that keeps you from anchoring that engagement to a spiritual connection with God and earth and neighbour. Take a deep breath, consult the “wise elders” in your life when you find yourself reacting out of alarm rather than love. Choose foods and pastimes that give the earth a break, choose entertainment that opens you to empathy and wonder. And during this month when we focus on this beautiful patch of earth we live on, and the way this is so completely integrated to our God-connection, we release ourselves to be still... be well... be whole.

“Be still and know that I am God.” And all God’s children – pause – and breathe – and say - “Amen.”

References cited:

Chabad – on Sabbath. https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/562077/jewish/What-Is-Shemittah.htm

CNN – on Greenland. [https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/14/weather/greenland-ice-sheet/index.html#:~:text=Scientist%20captures%20melting%20ice%20sheet%20in%20viral%20photo%20\(2019\)&text=\(CNN\)%20Greenland's%20ice%20sheet%20has,researchers%20at%20Ohio%20State%20University.](https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/14/weather/greenland-ice-sheet/index.html#:~:text=Scientist%20captures%20melting%20ice%20sheet%20in%20viral%20photo%20(2019)&text=(CNN)%20Greenland's%20ice%20sheet%20has,researchers%20at%20Ohio%20State%20University.)

Craigie, Peter. *Word Bible Commentary: Psalms 1-50*. Waco, TX: Word, 1983. Pp.341-346.

Robertson, David. “My View From Here: A Journal Entry for Clergy in Pandemic Times.” <https://chinookwindsregion.ca/2020/04/27/view-from-here/>

Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ*. NYC: Convergent, 2019.

Season of Creation. <https://seasonofcreation.org/about/#2020theme>

Wikipedia – on Jubilee. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jubilee_\(biblical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jubilee_(biblical))

Recommended reading:

Flood, Nicky. “The Importance of Stillness” <https://www.alustforlife.com/tools/the-importance-of-stillness>

Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath*. NYC: Bantam, 2000.

© 2020 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.