

November 20, 2022
"God in the Stillness"
Psalm 46 / Luke 23:33-43
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Today the Church officially observes "Reign of Christ" Sunday, or more traditionally, "Christ the King" Sunday. As we wrap up the Christian year this Sunday, on the threshold of Advent and the new Christian year which officially begins next Sunday, this is one of those rare times in the liturgical calendar when Easter and Christmas, the cross and the incarnation, come together.

That's why, as we prepare for the story of a vulnerable child born into a chaotic and oppressive world, the one hailed by angels, shepherds and philosophers at his birth, we now get the story of the one who is betrayed, condemned and abandoned at his death. The one mocked and crucified as the so-called "King of the Jews."

What kind of "king" dies pathetically on a cross? What kind of "king" can't even save himself?

This juxtaposition of Jesus' birth and death, as the womanist theologian Delores Williams articulated so well, is key to understanding the nature of the divine "kingdom." The kingdom Jesus points to as much in his birth and in his life as in his death, the very kingdom of God, is a reversal and a rejection of the earthly kingdom of Caesar.

Instead of domination, it's marked by servanthood. Instead of hierarchy, community. Instead of competition, cooperation. Instead of narcissism, humility. Instead of mockery, kindness. Instead of cruelty, mercy. Instead of fear, love.

That's why we at Calvary often refer to God's "kingdom" as God's "KIN-dom" – emphasizing precisely HOW it's different from the kingdoms of this world.

The juxtaposition of Jesus' humble birth with his torturous death drives that point home. Even on the cross, the very symbol of imperial domination and terror, the kingdom of God transcends. Love has the last word. God is present and active, LOVE is present and

active, even in and through what by most every account would seem to be godforsaken.

As one commentary suggests, “Where God’s reign is mocked and Caesar’s reign seems triumphant – there, precisely there, God reigns. And that imperial inscription above Jesus’ head,” ‘King of the Jews’, “the one meant to taunt, intimidate and demean – there, precisely there, God’s kingship is declared!”

The divine kin-ship, the divine kin-dom of love, is declared in the least likely of places. God makes God’s presence felt even in apparently godforsaken places. In a manger, say, at the mercy of strangers. On a cross, mocked by strangers who have lost their imagination, as Pastor John talked about last week – stuck in the belief, or at least the resignation, that there could be no other kingdom than Caesar’s.

In the face of seemingly godforsaken circumstances, the Psalmist reflects in our reading this morning, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in 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 its tumult.”

“The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; God utters God’s voice, the earth melts.”

“God makes wars cease to the end of the earth; God breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; God burns the shields with fire.”

And then this: “Be still, and know that I am God!” BE STILL.

In the midst of uproarious nations and tottering kingdoms, in the midst of endless wars and violence, in the midst of a climate-changing earth and trembling mountains, in the midst of chaotic frenzy and overwhelming fear, in the midst of capitalist busy-ness and near-constant activity, even now on the verge of a season which can so easily spin us off-center if we let it, be still. Be still. Be still. Be still. Be still, and know that I am God.

I am a firm believer in panentheism, the theological notion that God is IN all living things and yet TRANSCENDS all living things. The divine mystery, the divine Spirit, is ever-present – both within and beyond us.

“Where can I go from your spirit?” the Psalmist declares elsewhere. “Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.’”

The God of Jacob is indeed our refuge, even if we sometimes run from that refuge. We take comfort in trusting that God is present no matter what. God is with us. God pursues us with goodness and mercy, in the language of Psalm 23. God FINDS us, no matter what, no matter where we are. Always.

But in the midst of all that relentlessly rages on in our lives and in the world around us, within the kingdoms of THIS world, and within the values of those kingdoms, the Psalmist reminds us that if we want to FIND God, if we want to know God, know WHO God is and know THAT God is, we need only start by being still.

Slowing down, stopping, enough to listen for the whisper. The still, small voice that Elijah heard on the mountain at the end of his proverbial rope – afraid for his life, hopeless, pleading that he might die. You may know something of what that feels like. The closest I’ve come is through various bouts with depression, throughout my adult life.

For Elijah and all of us, the voice is not found not in the great wind that was splitting mountains and breaking rocks. Not in the earthquake. And not in the fire. But in the “sound of sheer silence.”

Listen for the voice of God WITHIN you that can so easily, TOO easily, be drowned out by all the voices AROUND you. I think of Francis as someone who listened for and heard that voice within him, the divine voice that affirmed and reaffirmed his inherent worth,

his inherent belovedness, in the midst of so many voices in this world, even in his own family, that told him otherwise. The voice that nurtured a love for himself that matched his sincere and gentle love and concern for others. That is the Francis I remember.

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

The Quaker theologian and educator, Parker Palmer, describes the soul as a wild animal. He writes that "... the soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places."

But he also suggests that our souls are shy. "Just like a wild animal," he goes on, "it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out."

"But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance."

That wild creature, the soul within each of us, is the divine presence within us. The still, small voice of God that whispers to us, constantly, but that we only hear when we are still enough, quiet enough, to discern it in the midst of all the other voices that scream and shout for our attention.

Turns out, as Jesus reminds us again and again, that the kin-dom of God is within us. Each of us. All of us. But the kin-dom of God only comes when we learn to be still. When we slow down and make time and space to actually listen. To pay attention. To know the God that IS. To be reminded WHO God is, and so who and whose we are.

Most of you know that I LOVE the Eagles. And by the Eagles, I mean the band, not the football team!

Theirs were the first songs I learned to play on the guitar when I was a kid, whose basic voice range more or less fit my own – though less and less so as I and my voice get older! They put out a song about 20 years ago called "Learn To Be Still."

A few verses from that song came back to me as I reflected on Psalm 46 this week:

*Just another day in paradise
As you stumble to your bed
Give anything to silence
Those voices ringing in your head*

*We are like sheep without a shepherd
We don't know how to be alone
So we wander 'round this desert
Wind up following the wrong gods home*

And then this:

*There are so many contradictions
In all these messages we send
Keep asking
How do I get outta here?
Where do I fit in?*

*Though the world is torn and shaken
Even if your heart is breakin'
It's waiting for you to awaken
Someday you will
Learn to be still*

Be still, and know that I am God!

Let me close with a poem from Pablo Neruda, translated from his native Spanish. A poem I've shared before as a way to pray ourselves into worship.

*Now we will keep count to twelve
and we will keep still.*

*For once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.*

*It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.*

*Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales*

*and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.*

*Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.
What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about:
I want no truck with death.*

*If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.*

*Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.*

*Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.*

Be still, and know that I am God. May it be so.