

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on July 11, 2021.

BE STILL

Be still and know that I am God.

Psalm 46:10

This morning we continue our summer focus on worship. As I have shared before, the purpose of this series is to seek to learn from our Covid experiences. We can use our experiences to reshape our liturgy in meaningful ways. Again, I invite your feedback all through the summer. In August the Worship Committee will meet in order to reform our liturgy for the Fall.

In our series thus far, we have focused on the larger questions of worship. We have explored the purpose of worship, the importance of using the body in worship and last week we looked at the different functions of music in worship. Next week we will begin to work through our order of worship. We will learn what each major element of our liturgy adds to our experience of worship.

Today we will explore our preparation for worship. I am not talking about the leaders of worship. Those charged with leadership in worship have our own tasks that we have worked on all week to be ready for Sunday morning. We practice our parts at various times on Fridays and Saturdays. The preparation I am referring to is the work that each worshiper who comes through the front door is invited to make. When you sit down in your favorite pew, the words of the Psalmist, “**Be still and know that I am God**” point towards the preparation that each worshiper is called to make. If we are to encounter God in worship, we must – **Be still**. The simple words still have a depth of meaning.

On a very basic level the command to “be still” refers to our bodies. One of the most profound insights of the Jewish people was the concept of sabbath. We human beings need time to refresh our bodies and spirits. Worship is part of the concept of sabbath. Worship is to be a sabbath time when our bodies are still.

Men and women who came before us had much harsher lives than ours today. Before the discoveries of antibiotics, the importance of sanitation and modern agriculture, human life was often as Hobbes said **poor, nasty, brutish, and short**. People in the past worked long hours that tired their bodies. But they had usual set routines on their farms. Today we do not work at such physically demanding jobs, but we have more stress. We are bombarded by stimuli from the time we get out of bed until we go to sleep. We fight with the clock over calendars and deadlines. We receive demands through texts, emails and phone calls. In our confirmation classes we talk about the stewardship of time. I have discovered that many of our teens are so scheduled that they do not even start homework until 9:00pm. Many young parents find the only time they can sit down in quiet is here in our sanctuary for one hour.

Becoming open to God’s presence begins by stilling our bodies. Let us try an exercise that will be easy for some but difficult for others. These are the directions. Please put both feet on the floor and straighten your posture. Close your eyes. We will then take slow and deep breathes. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouths. We will do this for about one minute. We will begin now, feet on the floor, good posture, breathe in and out, in and out....

Now that our bodies are still, we must calm our spirits. Our minds can be full of many things. Our thoughts can run to shopping list, to do lists, etc. If we are to be open to God’s presence, we need to empty our minds and slow down our thoughts. Pope Gregory the Great reminds us of the importance of **Resting quietly in the presence of God**.

So, in the next few moments I ask you to try a short centering prayer to still your souls. Pick a word or phrase like Jesus or God loves me and repeat it over and over again as Maoto plays.

(Music plays)

When we have stilled our bodies and our souls the next step in preparing for worship is to focus on being open to hearing God's voice. We heard part of the story of Elijah in our Old Testament Lesson for today. Elijah had experienced a great triumph in his contest on Mt. Carmel. If you remember the story Elijah had a standoff with the Priests of Baal. They had each set up an altar of sacrifice. Elijah told the prophets of Baal to pray that their Gods would take their sacrifice. He gave them lots of time to perform their rituals. Nothing happened. Then Elijah prayed and fire came down and consumed his offerings.

This victory over her priests angered Queen Jezebel, so Elijah had to flee to the wilderness to escape the Queen's wrath. He felt defeated and alone. He questions God's purpose for his life. He is told to stand on the mountain and God would come to him. Then a great wind passed before him, then an earthquake occurred and then a great fire. But we are told that God was not in the wind, earthquake or fire. They were followed by silence. In the silence Elijah heard God speak to him. God gave him new hope and purpose.

You and I are called to stillness. The writer Annie Dillard tells us – **“Whenever there is stillness there is the still small voice, God's speaking from the whirlwind, nature's old song, and dance...”**

May we focus our minds and hearts. Please turn to 414 in the hymnal. The choir will sing it through once and then we will join in chanting these words several times. May they help us **Be still and know that I am God.**

(Singing)

The practice of being still can allow God to bring order to our lives. The writer Philip Yancy tells us – **“Be still. In that focus, all else comes into focus. In that rift in my routine, the universe falls into alignment.”** These sabbath moments of stillness open us to God's speaking into our lives and bring wholeness.

Finally, the experience of stillness is a foretaste of heaven. Writing in his Monastery at Jarrow in the North of England around 730 AD, the Venerable Bede commented on our verse in these words:

“When the labors and hardships of this age come to an end and our debts, (that is) all our faults, have been forgiven, the entire people of the elect will rejoice eternally in the sole contemplation of the divine vision, and that most longed for command of our Lord and Savior will be fulfilled: “Be still and see that I am God.”

Stillness restores our bodies,
Heals our souls,
Opens us to God,
And allows us a glimpse into eternity.
Be still and know that I am God