

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for February 19, 2012
Lessons: Psalm 46 and Mark 9:1-10

BE STILL AND KNOW

“Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change” It is human nature to want stability, unless conditions become so bad that deliverance is the only hope. When we feel at all stable and have settled into our situations in life, we don’t welcome changes we cannot control.

Thursday evening, in our seminar on the ancient Near East, we saw that around 1200 B.C. the regional system collapsed into a dark age which lasted some two centuries. We don’t know quite what happened, although there are signs for the historian of invasions, local uprisings, and famines. The once powerful kingdom of the Hittites was destroyed, in the Fertile Crescent cities were sacked, and kings of Egypt wrote of having repulsed invasions of “sea peoples.” The regional trade network of mining and shipping broke apart, and the world powers retracted into themselves to preserve whatever they could of their former way of life. Written records of the kind kept at the palaces all but ceased.

I suspect that to people of privilege whose lives and prosperity had centered around the palaces of Egypt and Mesopotamia, it must have seemed that the world was breaking apart, but within this collapse of the regional system that had governed and stabilized life, the Israelites left slavery and, led by their God who adopted them, entered and occupied their new land. In this period of darkness from the larger view, many peoples found new homes, though not without violence. The tribes of the children of Israel became under their great king David the nations of Israel and Judah. Across the Near East, the palace-centered culture’s writing in cuneiform, a speciality done by professionals, was replaced with an alphabetic script that enabled more people to write, opening new possibilities among which were our Bible. When copper and tin could no longer be imported to make bronze implements and weapons, the common people started using a metal much more readily available, and so the Bronze Age was replaced by the Iron Age.¹

We can be sure that the people who had enjoyed power and privilege under the system of palace-centered cultures did not give up control willingly or gracefully, and we can be equally sure that not everything new that emerged was fair or admirable. It was a time of brutality when the rough and ignorant seized power and took what had been withheld from them but had also been built with their labor and defended with their blood. Former outlaws,

slaves, and mercenaries took over – among them in one section of the Near East split by the muddy Jordan River that flowed south into the Dead Sea, the tribes of the children of Israel.

We live in an advanced state of rapid change. Systems once taken for granted and enjoyed by those they privileged though suffered by those they denied have come apart or been so loosened as to be rendered ineffective. One secondary result that you can see around you this morning is a sanctuary more empty than filled. Under the system of my childhood, “everybody” went to church. It was the thing to do, and people who questioned it were regarded as odd and somehow suspect or undesirable. Men were in charge. There were no women ordained to church office as we had here last Sunday without any thought of wrongness or even innovation. No one would have expected women to be called to testify before a Congressional committee on a matter of women’s health and well-being. In my childhood, the teenagers on the playground spoke of non-white people as though they were completely apart and distinct from us, never present to challenge the scorn in the common sayings bantered about, the contempt in the terms used, or the disgusting lies that made the jokes seem funny.

Is all change good? Certainly not. I feel quite safe saying there is not one of us here this morning who feels entirely comfortable with the changes we have seen and experienced in our lifetimes so far, not one who is fully satisfied with the collapse of the old systems of social regulation and control. Don’t we all feel at times that some things have “gotten out of hand”? I’m not talking about the mentality that resents having to give up its old racist, sexist, or homophobic jokes, that bristles at being questioned about biased assumptions. I’m talking about reasonable, kind, and open-minded people troubled by the confusion, the commotion of shouted demands, the angry and sometimes self-righteous voices insistent upon their own view and their own way, and the uncertainty of plans once taken for granted as normal. All we need do is turn on the television and listen to the angry babble to understand the beginning of the poem written by William Butler Yeats after World War I.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.²

Now, let’s bring it home to the personal. The psalmist who writes, “Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change” speaks faith’s courage out of fear. Who else

declares, “We will not fear” but someone who is scared and fighting against the debilitating effects of fear? When we feel no threat, we have no need for courage, right? When we feel no doubt, we may live the day without having to call upon our faith. But do we live such peaceful, stable, manageable lives? Not many of us do, and even people and families that look very stable and happy from the outside have their griefs, fears, and anxieties.

We live in an age of *speed up*. Don’t do just two things at once, do three, four, or five. Is there such a thing as a non-rush order? I was not happy to learn that people were doing heavy labor rushing to keep up with the quotas of a metric imposed upon them, and doing it in heat of up to 120 degrees, just so I could get a book a day or two sooner.³ Neither was I pleased to learn they were being given false hopes for full time, stable positions that were unlikely ever to materialize. Isn’t life hard enough? Do we have to make it harder for each other? We even structure children’s education that way: keep moving, don’t stop for questions, stories, or curiosity; just stay on track, and those who can’t keep up fall by the wayside. Maybe they’ll get it in the next spiral. No, they won’t. Learning doesn’t work that way, but who dares question the metric?

Into the stress, strain, and grief life imposes upon us and we impose upon each other and, yes, upon ourselves, comes the voice, “Be still, and know that I am God.” I heard a minister once quote somebody who recalled how much peace he felt when he finally gave up and resigned his position as “manager of the universe.” In this stillness before God, I realize in the deeper, often suppressed regions of my mind and heart that I am not God, not the manager of life, not one called to be perfect, not one who needs to be always in control. Someone else is God, and that someone else, infinitely wiser but also more understanding and compassionate than I, cares for me. God will not take over my life, will not take away my freedom to make choices (including poor ones), but neither will God give up on me and cast me aside.

Knocked off their feet by a vision of glory they see as splendor, Jesus’ disciples realize that he, not any of them, is the one who will lead the way. What they do not see yet is that the splendor is only the vision; the reality of Jesus’ true glory will be revealed in his self-sacrifice for us. Being still and knowing God is God is more than just relaxing and letting go; it is letting Christ replace our anxieties with trust in God’s redemptive love that will not let go of us. In our forum, we will continue talking about human needs, joys, and concerns that can become spiritual matters if we open them to God. We will look at visioning as something personal that can become a productive conversation with our own souls (our very selves) in the presence of God’s love and understanding. So we can learn what it means to say that even in a time of change and uncertainty, we will not fear because God will be with us. Amen.

Notes:

1. The principal source for this third seminar was Marc Van De Mieroop's book, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000 – 323 BC*, second edition, Blackwell publishing, 2007.
2. William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," written in 1919.
3. *Allentown Morning Call*, "Inside Amazon's Warehouse," by Spencer Soper, September 18, 2011, online at http://articles.mcall.com/2011-09-18/news/mc-allentown-amazon-complaints-20110917_1_warehouse-workers-heat-stress-brutal-heat