

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, Nov 21, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"BE STILL...KNOW THAT GOD IS GOD"

Psalm 46:10

Back when I was in Sunday School, and we're talking say 45 years ago, things were different. For one thing, Sunday Schools had far more children. It's hard to believe but 200 or more children came to Sunday School here each week. I can show you the numbers from the 1965 annual report. It was the same in the church I grew up in. Another difference was that we didn't have children's time in church. Just getting 200 kids up to the front would have taken 5 minutes and another 5 minutes for them to exit. As soon as we arrived at church, children went to Sunday School, adults to the sanctuary for worship.

Now it's good to have the children here in worship for a while. They do seem to energize the service and lift our spirits. What would you think of children being in the church for the whole service? In some denominations they are, because they are used to it. But generally we believe that youngsters would find it hard to sit still for an entire worship service. So Sunday School classes with their peers and lessons geared towards their age level seems best, though children may get more from worship than we think.

The 46th Psalm which inspired Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God", contains this line, verse 10, "Be still, and know that I am God." We know children find it hard to be still for long, but what about us? Oh we may be able to sit still for a while in church or at some other meeting. But do we really know how to be still not just in body but in spirit, too?

Now there are many things that shake us in spirit and make us tremble inwardly. At the beginning of Psalm 46 the Psalmist writes, "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." Well, the Hebrew people did know trouble. The nation was constantly threatened by stronger enemies against whom their armies seemed quite inadequate. Furthermore, the chaos which God tamed at creation sometimes still broke forth with demonic force causing the sea to roar and foam, the earth to crack open, and the landscape to change. So yes, the Hebrews saw the powers arrayed against them. Those powers caused shaking not just outwardly

but in their hearts, too. And what caused the shaking sometimes originated, not out there, but within them. Often the prophets spoke God's word to the Hebrews calling out their disobedience and rebellion. And sensitive souls among them trembled inwardly at the coming judgement.

Look, there is much that unsettles us, that causes us to shake inwardly, to tremble and to be fearful. The power of chaos breaks through in the world and in our own lives. Trouble or illness comes to us or someone we love. Recently I heard a woman say that the first time her husband lost his job their whole world was turned upside down. What was going to happen? Would they lose their home? How would they live? It was a terribly unsettling experience. Or terrorists break through and the world changes right before our eyes. Psalm 46 was often read or preached right after the events of 9/11 over 9 years ago. And didn't that event shake us right to the core of our being? Recently we saw the power of the waters in Nova Scotia, with rivers rising, threatening homes and property and people, taking out bridges and roadways.

Jesus leaves no doubt that these earth shaking and soul shaking experiences would be part of our life. "In this world you will have trouble," he told his disciples. He also says that the times before he comes again will be very unsettling. "...nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven... they will arrest you and persecute you..."

Yes, there are powers and events that shake us to the very core. And the powers of chaos can be in our own lives, causing us to do the things we hate and not to do the things we want to do. Just take a simple example. How many times have you said to yourself, "From now on I'm going to be patient," but the next day you find yourself losing your patience, often over something small and insignificant. And you say with Paul, "O wretched person that I? Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

The Hebrews were often shaken outwardly and inwardly. And it was hard for them to be still because they were seeking to secure themselves. Rather than finding their refuge and strength in the Lord their God, they sought refuge and strength in treaties with other nations. Or in worshipping foreign gods along with the LORD. Or by building stronger armies. But all this only increased their fear and their sense of insecurity.

It's the same with us, too. We find it hard to be still because we are doers who try to do it all ourselves. Or by seeking to do what only God can do, trying

to control that which we cannot control. We take the place of God himself. And that makes us more unsettled, more shaken, more anxious, more fearful.

But just when we are most fearful, when we feel most shaken, the word of God which came to Israel comes to us, too. "Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations! I am exalted in the earth!" This word gave Israel strength and courage and faith. It does that for us, too. "Be still and know that I am God!" That is good news, indeed! It means that we are not God, even though we may try to act like we are. The LORD - he is God. He is in charge of the creation. To be sure, the powers of evil and sin and chaos break through sometimes. But they are not from God and they will not have the final word. God is the One who is ultimately in control, and he will have the final word. God calmed the chaos at creation and brought order to the world. God burst the bonds of evil and sin and death when he raised his Son from the grave. God is the One who will overcome all the powers and principalities and bring about a new heaven and a new earth. God is the one who holds us in loving hands. He enables us to pick up shattered dreams and broken pieces and to start again. He gives us hope and light and brings peace to our troubled souls.

Do you remember that magnificent story from Mark chapter 4, one of my favorite Bible passages. Jesus is with his disciples crossing Galilee in a boat. He is asleep in the stern while the disciples keep watch. Suddenly a fierce windstorm arose which threatened to capsize the craft. The wind blow with almost a demonic force and the waves were very great. The disciples thought it was the end. So they woke up Jesus and asked him, "Don't you care if we perish?" And Jesus awoke, and with all the power of God that was in him he raised his hand and said to the storm, "Peace! Be still!" A great calm came to the angry waves and also to the disciples' hearts. And now they were filled with awe, saying, "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Gradually they were coming to see that this man in their midst had the right to say of himself, "Be still, and know that I am God."

Yes, when our hearts shake, God's word comes to you and me and to the nations. "I am your refuge and strength. I am a very present help in trouble. I am in your midst. I am the God who provides for all your needs. I am the Lord God of hosts. I am greater than whatever is causing you to tremble. I am greater than all the powers, all the armies, all the rulers. I break the bow and shatter the spear; I burn the shield with fire. I helped you and the whole creation as Easter morning dawned and my crucified Son was raised from the grave. I am greater than death and hell. I am the eternal God who lives forevermore. I am the God of mercy, who forgives you all your sins. My grace is sufficient for you. I am God, and if let me be your refuge and strength, no power in all creation will separate you from my love or defeat my purpose for

you. Believe in me and put all your trust in my Son for He is your peace and your salvation and your security. Let not your hearts be troubled or afraid. Take courage and stand firm. Be still and know that I am God!"

That woman who spoke of the fear that came when her husband lost his job, went on to say, "But it wasn't the end of the world. My husband has lost his job twice more since then, but with God's help we've gotten through it every time and even found blessings in our predicament. God is a very present help in trouble."

Well, Israel discovered that about God too. Over and over again God proved to be a very present help in trouble. That's why the nation survived in the face of all threats and was able to give witness to the God who was indeed their refuge and strength.

One of the great gifts of worship is the opportunity to be still and know that God is God. No matter what the readings happen to be or the theme of the sermon or the music, God always speaks to us in worship, "Be still and know that I am God." And so we go from here with hope; with a sense of security; with peace in our souls, and with the confidence that as hard as things may be, we will be OK. Things will work out according to God's plan and purpose. And the way the world is, this is a blessing we need just about once a week, if not more.

A man who lives in Hawaii writes how, because of the time difference with the continental U.S., the NFL Monday Night Football game is played mid-afternoon Hawaii time. The local TV station delays its telecast until 6:30 in the evening. But when his favorite team plays, he can't wait for television, so he listens to the game live on satellite radio. Then he watches the game on television, too. If he knows his team has won the game, it influences how he watches it. If his team fumbles the ball or throws an interception, he thinks, "That's bad, but it's okay. In the end, we'll win!"

Friends, we know how it ends. We've read the last chapter of the Bible. Sin and chaos and evil do their worst, but God is God. His purposes prevail. The Lamb who was slain is victorious. He is exalted among the nations. He is exalted in the earth. And the Lord God is with us now. The God of Jacob is our refuge and our strength. So 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. God is a very present help in trouble. And God says to us in these moments and whenever our hearts shake within. "Be still and know that I am God."