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Being Still. Being Thankful.

Psalm 46 *“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations.
I am exalted in the earth.”*

Colossians 1:11-20 *...may you be prepared to endure everything with patience,
while joyfully giving thanks to God the Father....*

There is a story from Zen Buddhism about a man on a horse that is galloping wildly down the road, the rider hanging on for dear life. Someone standing on the roadside shouts to the horseman as he races by: “Where are you going?” The rider shouts back: “Don’t ask me! Ask the horse!” Does that not describe our own lives and point to our need for an intentional spiritual life? We race around here and there, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. We are like the man on the horse being carried this way and that, feeling out of control, uncentered, and unsatisfied. And in our unawareness, we are galloping over other people, not to mention the creation itself, out of our lack of insight, understanding, and connectedness.

We can stop the horse by practicing being quiet, sitting and breathing, entering the present moment, allowing our inner life to settle down. It is simple, but not necessarily easy. It takes consistent practice, but we can do it. This is the first and most basic step in the life of prayer, and the one we most often skip. We do not give much attention to the physical aspect of prayer. We turn prayer into a kind of mental exercise. We THINK about God but do not actually touch our relationship with God. We THINK or worry about other people and their needs, but do not hold them in our awareness and love, while letting them go into God's care and listening for what we might be called to do in response. Our praying becomes a frustrating preoccupation with our problems or dilemmas, trying to "figure things out", rather than simply being aware of what is going on in us, gaining understanding and insight, without sinking into it. When we practice stopping and calming, sitting solidly and quietly, using our breathing to lead us into the present moment and place where we are, then we give our inward journey, or prayer life, a solid foundation. We can watch the horses galloping around in us without getting on them!

I think this is what Psalm 46 is about. It is a poem of God’s majesty and rule over all creation, human and non-human. Notice the chaos and turmoil in the first part of the psalm. Though the earth change--which it is constantly doing!--though the mountains in the sea shake and the oceans roar and foam, God is our refuge and strength. Nations in an uproar--including our own. Kingdoms tottering--as all will. Yet it is God whose voice melts the earth, who is the real power of life, who is with us as a refuge and source of strength. God is the maker of peace, the one who is working to end wars, to destroy the weapons of war. God is above every nation in judgment and mercy, and always moving in the direction of peace. That is who God is and what God is doing. Therefore, that is where we are to be. We take refuge in God, root our lives in God, so that we are not overcome with fear or anxiousness, and can be instruments of God's mercy and peace in the world. We can climb off of all those horses, including the warhorses!

How do we ground our lives in God and what God is doing? First we stop. “Be still, and know that I am God.” The literal meaning of this is, "Stop fighting!" Stop our conflicts, inward and outward, as persons, as nations, as religions, as whatever little group we identify with so that we fall into conflict with others. We practice stopping and calming ourselves, physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally. Then we are able to inwardly listen and be aware of God's presence in and through all creation, and in our own lives. This is the inward work we must do if we are to offer ourselves as channels of God’s

peace, justice, forgiveness, and compassion.

All of this is about cultivating our capacity for being silent and receptive to the deepest meanings and the sacredness of life around us and in us. Diarmuid O'Murchu, Irish Catholic writer in the field of spirituality, says in his book *RELIGION IN EXILE*: "Our capacity to listen, receive, perceive and be porous to the mystery that surrounds us is an experience the majority of humankind have never encountered." O'Murchu observes that we live immersed in noise, words, and activism, always living on the surface of things, never sensing the deeper meanings and relationships into which our lives are woven. He goes on to say: "Silence is a rare commodity in our time. The ability to be--and be still--before the encapsulating mystery of life is largely unknown. Consequently, both our analysis (political, social, religious) and the solutions we propose appear to be superficial, even false, lacking depth and wholeness." I would add, lacking real understanding. We often run around, trying to fix situations and people, offering easy answers for situations which we do not understand because we cannot be silent, because we cannot really listen.

This community has always valued stopping and calming, being still so that we can know that God is God and who we are in our relationship with God. We call it the inward journey, the practice of quieting our lives each day, opening ourselves to God's presence and movements, growing in self-understanding and awareness, deepening our capacity for love, joy, gratitude, and commitment to the things we feel God calling us to do. However, to value something doesn't mean that we are faithfully and fully doing it. Two weeks ago a group from a Disciples of Christ congregation in North Carolina was here on retreat. They wanted to meet with some of us to hear about our way of being a spiritual community and the spiritual practices, or disciplines, we commit to when we make a decision for membership. This always makes me very nervous, AND very conscious of how much easier it is for us to TALK about the inward journey than do DO it!

Practicing "being still and knowing that God is God" is an ongoing way of life. When our lives are going well and we are in good spirits, we tend to let go of the daily inward journey. We think we don't need it, because our outward journey, our outward life seems successful. And when our lives are in turmoil or we feel pressure and stress, we also avoid "being still" because we think that if we just exert more effort, we will eventually fix everything. All the time, we are climbing on every horse that comes along and going in every direction, anxious, fearful, despondent. We resist becoming quiet enough to look at and understand what we are feeling and to let God speak to us about it. When we become still, we make a wonderful discovery--we do not have to get on those horses! We can just watch them gallop around until before long they settle down. Let me push this horse image a little further. We can become "horse whisperers"! The more we practice becoming inwardly quiet and aware, we grow in our ability to understand and get insight into those experiences and feelings that were dragging us around. And when we grow in understanding, the fear, anxiousness, anger, or whatever it is, loses its grip on us. We can take care of those horses--the anger, hurt, depression, guilt, whatever--instead of climbing on them.

If we are trying to respond to the needs of our world and of people, and yet are at the mercy of our own anxiousness, anger, or despondency, then we can offer nothing to the world or to other people to make it better. When we are practicing "being still," stopping and calming, we open up our own inner life to God, thus to hope, energy, and, most importantly, love. Most important is to set aside a daily time of extended prayer and meditation, reflection and reading. And yet, at any moment, in any place, we can practice being still and knowing that God is God. Even in the most difficult situations we can, as Diarmuid O'Murchu says, become porous to the mystery of life that surrounds us, aware of being enveloped by God's mysterious, yet certain, care and keeping. We can even be on our horse and know where we are going.

In the reading from Colossians, Paul prays for the community to "be made strong through the strength that comes from God's glorious power." Isn't this saying the same thing, pointing us in the same direction? We can draw inner strength from our intimate and real awareness of God's dominion

over all creation, including our own lives. It is the strength of knowing that God has the final word, that what God is working for is what will really last, not the messes and turmoils and wrongheadedness that beset us as individuals or a human family. We have a connection with that power and can live out of it. This gives us the kind of strength Paul is talking about.

Because this is so, Paul prays that we be prepared to endure everything with patience. This is more than just “putting up with” things. And it has nothing to do with experiencing ourselves as victims of outward circumstances. It is a profound acceptance of every situation so that we are open to perceiving within it what God is teaching us and what God is doing, regardless of how hopeless or fearful things seem. Such patience, grounded in "being still", also enables us to get real insight into how we can respond in ways that are fruitful and loving, toward ourselves, others, and the world.

Paul then calls us to endure in a spirit of joyful thanksgiving. This joy is deeper than what we usually think of as happiness. It does not depend upon how things are going at the moment. This joy embraces the pain, hurt, or fear that we may feel, does not push it away or run from it. This kind of joy also embraces the beauty, goodness, and pleasures of life. It accepts both the garbage and the flowers of our lives, knowing that both are part of life. With this kind of joy, we touch a deeper thankfulness that does not depend on things going well. It is thankfulness that God is God and is present in all things, with divine love that envelops all things.

The strength, patience, joy, and thanksgiving that Paul wants for us are all related to our capacity to stop and to calm, to listen and to be deeply aware of life. It all arises as we draw from the well of our relationship with God, our connectedness to God. When we are people who can be still and know that God is God, we tap into that well, we touch that connection, that relationship. God truly becomes our refuge and strength. This refuge is not running away from life but entering the sanctuary of life where we touch what is really real. In that refuge we can embrace the total reality of our lives. We can acknowledge our fears, feelings of failure, our hurt or anger, our pride or arrogance, without being consumed or controlled by them. We can also acknowledge what is healthy, good, and beautiful in us and around us. In all of this, we grow in our capacity for that deeper kind of joy and thanksgiving. We can truly become instruments, channels of God's loving, redemptive activity in the world.