

Listening to the Still, Small Voice

Romans 8:22-27 Psalm 46

We're continuing a short series on the work of the Holy Spirit, anticipating Pentecost Sunday, which is a week from today.

This morning's message is a little different. Or, let's say it's going to begin a little differently. Because after I read our Scriptures, I'd like to walk us through something called "Phases of collective trauma response," as a way of locating ourselves on the map of our pandemic experience and our personal responses to it, to help us understand the process that we're going through from a very human perspective. And then put this in spiritual perspective, and talk about how the Spirit of God invites us into a place of peace and personal growth, during this highly unusual time.

Jesus said (John 14:25-27): "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

It is no surprise that Jesus connects the promise of the giving of the Holy Spirit with his peace, and freedom from fear. That's our theme this morning—the Holy Spirit and inner peace and rest in our hearts.

We have two readings this morning, first from Romans 8—a passage that was part of our worship a month ago, so it may sound familiar, because I want to reiterate the wonderful assurance about the Spirit praying in us during times of uncertainty.

Romans 8:22-27

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (longsuffering)

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Psalms 46

¹God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; God utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

⁸Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

¹¹The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

This is the word of the Lord!

Before reflecting on these readings, I'd like to direct your attention to a chart that is linked to this morning's worship (under the "Reflections" tab on our website), called "Phases of collective trauma response." (if we were all here I'd project it onto the wall there...) You can look at this chart after listening, or pause the recording now and open it and look it over and then continue listening. This comes from an organization called the Institute for Collective Trauma and Growth. This is a non-profit organization that deals exclusively with trauma response, and helping leaders and communities work through the psychological

and emotional and spiritual issues around disasters, and learn to recover, and grow from their experience so they can become thriving persons and communities again.

Now, the trauma they normally respond to is caused by a natural disaster like an earthquake or tsunami, or a human disaster like genocide, or 911, or some mass casualty event that deeply impacts a local community or region. We are in a *worldwide* event, though, and so this is new territory. However, the phases of collective trauma response still applies, and perhaps even more so now it needs to be paid attention to because this isn't a sudden, swiftly occurring, localized event that we experienced and are now recovering from. This was—and is—a gradual, slowly swelling, invisible force that we didn't know much about, and still don't know everything about, and are still learning about, and are still in the middle of. Globally. So the trauma isn't just about the virus and its physical effects. It is also about the seemingly unending nature of what we're going through, and the mystery of how we get past it and when, and what will the future look like. We're in the great unknown.

My goal in sharing this with you is to pull out a map, so to speak, and say, "This is where we are." If we are out hiking in the wilderness and we feel

disoriented and perhaps a bit lost, a map can help. This particular map that I'm about to walk us through doesn't get us out of the woods right away, but it does give us a sense of place and perspective, with a general sense of direction; and as a result, I hope, peace.

Because, after talking about these phases, we'll look at how we, as Spirit-led and Spirit-filled people, can call upon spiritual resources, our own inner resources, the Spirit within, to respond in hope and faith. In order to see God, experience God, and let God, through the Holy Spirit, lead us into a hopeful, promised future. And gain personal peace.

So, let's walk through these phases of collective trauma response, and see where this rings true for you personally, and for humanity's collective experience and response to this world-wide pandemic event. The first phase is:

Heroic phase. This is the initial adrenaline rush directly following a cataclysmic event, and the acknowledgement of the reality about what has happened or is happening. This phase tends to involve a lot of business and activity related to what has happened. This heroic phase can involve things like getting people out of harm's way, or evacuations (or quarantines), search and rescue, a lot of medical intervention, initial psychological first aid, assessment,

investigation, and countless other necessary tasks. The heroic phase is all about how we immediately help those who need help, and how do we keep things going for everyone else where possible. This phase can last weeks, or months.

Think of this for yourself: sometime in March or April, did you go through a time of making “heroic” efforts to fix, adjust, help, or rescue someone or something? I know I sure did. The first three weeks after we had to close things down were some of the busiest days I’ve had as a pastor—mentally at least. Scrambling to figure out what to do, and then how to do it, to keep the church functioning and make sure you all are alright. Dayle felt this way, probably even more so as the administrative hub around which we roll as a church. For you, it may have been madly making phone calls, giving support to someone or to an organization, or purchasing/making PPE for medical workers. My sister, who is a nurse working with post-hospitalization patients, got reassigned to triage people who felt sick to determine what their illness is, or even if they’re sick, and then where they should go to be seen, or stay home. She experienced the massive adrenaline rush that went on day after day, for weeks. It isn’t just the activity that makes it heroic as much as how it felt to do it. Because it’s usually accompanied by high octane energy and some amount of stress.

It's safe to say that the majority have passed this phase, collectively, and moved onto the next phase:

Disillusionment phase. This phase tends to be marked by a pervasive feeling of exhaustion. As people experience their adrenaline waning, they often describe feeling physically fatigued. It also can be a time when survivors describe an overall sense that nothing they do can change what has happened. We have arrived at a point of coming to terms with the reality that we are in this, and that nothing we can do by our best efforts, or money, or strategy, can get us out of it. At least not right away. We have come to terms with reality, and that we can't fix it by heroic effort.

We experience a lot of emotions in the disillusionment phase, emotions that may have been held at bay during the hero phase due to so many tasks requiring attention. Emotions may include grief, sadness, guilt, loneliness, gratitude, appreciation, and much more, and sometimes all mixed together.

A friend, an executive who had to start working from home in April wrote to a group of us last week and told us a story: he was running errands for his family, a short trip to the grocery store to pick up a few things. He was stopped at a red light, and while sitting there, out of the blue, it all caught up to him in that

moment and hit him unexpectedly. He said he started sobbing. And once that floodgate opened he said he sobbed uncontrollably for several minutes. He pulled into the store parking lot and had to just sit there for a while until he felt he could go into the store without looking like a mess (or like he was sick!). He had been holding it together for his family and his business and just couldn't contain his emotions any more. That's the kind of thing that can happen during this phase. And this is where we are right now!

This phase generally lasts for weeks or months and can feel like a roller coaster ride of highs and lows (represented by the bumpy line on the chart).

Now, not everyone experiences this or feels all the emotions. Remember, this is a *collective* response and process, in a community and society. So not everyone goes through this with the same intensity. Some people might just have a low-level feeling of "when is this going to be over??" or an experience of restlessness, of wanting to get back to normal. But many do experience the intensity of the emotions. And that needs to be acknowledged and normalized as part of the experience of a pandemic, or any disaster.

Now, I'm going to venture a guess—an educated guess based on what I've learned, on what I have felt in myself, and what I have been hearing lately from

others, like my friend: I'm going to guess that many of you have had some sort of personal meltdown within the last few weeks. Maybe you are in the middle of one right now. If so, welcome to the fellowship of those who have melted down, perhaps more than once over the past few weeks! And especially if you have children at home, or other dependents that you are caring for or are just worried about, or you are struggling financially, or something else, this is all magnified for you.

It's pretty clear that we are in the middle of this phase right now. And that can be frustrating because this isn't being resolved as soon as we would like. And I hope just naming it helps bring you some relief. You're okay, and you are going to be okay; what you are feeling and experiencing is normal and you are not alone.

Many people, or communities, make attempts to jump right to rebuilding during the hero phase. It's the old attempt at the quick fix. You know, good old American ingenuity and hard work can solve this straightaway. Some may see the downward slope of disillusionment as negative, or as depressing, rather than simply a general loss of energy, which is normal following a prolonged adrenaline rush. And when this disillusionment phase is viewed as negative or wrong there

are renewed attempts at making a quick fix. However, these attempts prove unsustainable. The more lasting work to rebuild and restore tend to occur only after survivors have had a chance to acknowledge reality (get to the end of themselves), rest and recoup following the adrenaline rush that commonly occurs after a disaster, or a pandemic.

So, friends, you don't have to feel bad about feeling bad from time to time. If you need to fall apart, fall apart. It might even be good for our kids or grandkids to see us expressing ourselves this way occasionally. It shows we're human, and we can look to God for renewal, strength and peace (which we'll talk about in a moment).

If we are really feeling it, that tells us that what we need is rest and recuperation. And for us these days, rest includes taking a break from the news and from Facebook and all that. Get off it for a while. It doesn't help. Giving yourself permission to acknowledge that this is out of your control—out of *our* control—and letting yourself feel the feelings, and then getting the rest you need, will actually make things better in the long run, and will prepare us for the next phase:

Rebuilding and Restoration. This phase involves business again, but this is *not* the same as going back. And, this time, rather than individual heroic efforts, it tends to be collaborative, patient, steady, and focused on the best interests of the wide range of people who have been impacted by what has happened. This is a slow and steady rebuilding for *everyone*. It also tends to be creative and inspired by mutual efforts representing a range of voices from the community. We'll get there. And we will have to get there in spite of the voices and efforts of those who think we can still find a swift solution (by November 3rd if you know what I mean).

The final stage, then, is:

Wiser living. This phase has many names, including the "new normal." That is what I have been calling it. It generally refers to an acknowledgment that what has occurred has changed me, and you, it has changed the community, and the world, in a lasting way. Though healing will happen, there will be losses to grieve. And, there will be a hopeful future to embrace and live into. I like it that the folks at the Institute call this "wiser living." Because the goal is to learn and grow and become wise as a result of our response to the events of our lives.

Now, I would love to ask you what you think of this, and have a conversation about it together. Obviously, we can't do that at the moment, but I hope you might take some time to find yourself in here, and reflect on what has been your experience for the last two and half months.

Before moving on to our Scripture reflection, I want us to notice what the good folks from ICTG say at the bottom of the chart: this process of going from precipitating event and heroic phase to our wiser living and new normal can take 24 to 60 months. That's 2 to 5 years! I wonder what you think of *that*? I'll just speak for myself and say, that's actually a relief to me. It took me a while to see it that way, but I eventually got to a place of feeling relieved. Because it takes the short term need to try to fix things off the table. And since I like to fix things, and get things done, it's a relief to be released from that expectation. I like to check stuff off my list. But this isn't a checklist sort of situation we're in. And that feels like a relief to me because, (1) it's not about me and my effort; it's going to be a *collective* and *collaborative* journey, *together*, one day at a time; and, (2) it's a relief because it allows me (us) to let the Spirit lead over time, and allow the Holy Spirit to do what the Spirit will do, quite apart from my supposedly good efforts and great ideas.

Which leads to my short reflection on our texts for today. And it's going to be short because it is a simple reminder of what we already know to be a helpful response to times of trouble—times of disillusionment (since we're in that phase). And that is: To practice quietness and trust, and be still. To let God be God in the midst of this time. And let the Spirit of God pray in and through us.

Let's look at Psalm 46 for a moment. The background images of psalm 46 are turbulent—we might even say trauma-inducing. Three sets of images are used: 1. There is turbulence in creation: earthquakes shaking and volcanoes erupting out of the ocean; flood waters spilling onto land. 2. The next set of images refers to political turbulence: nations in turmoil, kingdoms that rise and fall, solid achievements of governments melting away like wax under a hot sun. 3. The third set of images refers to warfare-type turbulence: bows, spears, chariots.

It's pretty easy to think of contemporary examples in all three of these categories, isn't it: natural disaster, politics, and warfare. So, here we are again—there isn't anything happening today that wasn't happening when the psalmist composed this prayer about 3,000 years ago.

And in the midst of turbulence and upheaval and change, the psalmist *prays* in response. Not just in Psalm 46, but all over the Psalms and the Bible.

And this particular prayer is one of the best examples of a person praying, not to *escape* from upheaval and change, or to rage against it, but to *find God in the midst of it*. There is not a hint of escapism in the prayers of the people in the Bible, or any of God's people throughout history. What we find, rather, are prayers that recognize that God is always present, that God helps people *in the midst* of trouble and change, and that God works for good.

Because even though the imagery of Psalm 46 is turbulent, turbulence is not the subject of the prayer. God is. "*God is our refuge and strength. God is a very present help in times of trouble, though the world is changing. God is in the midst of the peoples. God makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. God breaks the bow and shatters the spear*" and so on.

This is so wonderful, and so important to us because we tend to put our trouble, or the world's trouble as the subject of our thoughts and prayers. Or we put *ourselves* as the subject of our prayers.

Someone once described a lot of prayer as 'worrying in God's presence': *'I'm so worried about this, and I'm so concerned about that.'* When that happens, God isn't really invited into the center of our prayer life; it's more like we just want God to eavesdrop on our worrisome conversations with ourselves. But it's

wonderful how many times in Scripture, when it tells us to pray, it tells us to make God the subject. For example, from Philippians 4: “Be anxious for nothing; rather let your requests be made known *to God*, and the peace *of God* will guard your hearts and minds *in Christ Jesus*.” And from Psalm 62: “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation; my fortress; I shall never be shaken.” The great reminder here is: make God the subject of our prayers.

In Psalm 46 it says, “Come and behold the *works of the Lord*... See what *God* does.” He doesn’t say, “Oh my gosh, look at the upheaval in the world!” He *acknowledges* it, without attempts at escape, and without falling into anxiety or anger, and turns his attention fully to God, and becomes absorbed in who God is and what God does. And this seems to give the writer a sense of calm and confidence. It steadies the heart and mind.

And it leads to the grand conclusion to the prayer, which is really the grand invitation to respond to the God who is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble and change: “Be still and know that I am God.” Be still and know that I am God. That’s the invitation, in response.

Not, 'get busy and try to fix things.' Good luck with that. There is indeed a time and place for action—and act we must, at the right time, doing the things that we have control over. But here, and everywhere in Scripture, the invitation to respond to the world and to the God who loves us is, first and foremost, to quiet ourselves, to know God and be known by God. To quiet our hearts and minds, and gain perspective by focusing our energy and attention on the God of history, the God who loves you and loves the world, the God who knows what's going on and knows what he's doing. Because God has seen it all before, and handled it all before.

God's solution and invitation in response to change and distress is: Be still and know that I am God. Stay present to the God who is present to you—the God of history who has handled a few changes and upheavals and pandemics before!

Here is another Bible verse to encourage you. It's Isaiah 30:15: *In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength.* Just sit with that for a moment and let it sink in. *In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength.* Really?!?! That's the proper response to turmoil and pandemic???. Yup! It's exactly what we need to hear

during this disillusionment phase. Return and *rest*. You're tired. You need rest, and spiritual rejuvenation. Be quiet, and trust.

Once again, God's solution to upheaval, pandemic, and change and all that, is to be still. To quiet ourselves. To trust. Be still and be quiet long enough so we can look to God, hear from God, and let God lead. Again, from Psalm 62: "For God alone my soul waits *in silence*." We need the silence to hear, and receive.

These are all examples of prayers that acknowledge who God is and what God does in a response of trust, of waiting, of quiet confidence, of knowing God and being known by God. The God who is not threatened by or worried about anything, the God who makes things right, the God who is with us.

The apostle Paul gives us such a great boost in our passage from Romans (verse 26): when we don't have words to say, or know how to pray as we ought, the Spirit intercedes for us. And then Paul says something amazing in the very next verse, which is easy to miss, or easy to misinterpret: "God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit." When we hear the words, "God searches the heart," what would you normally think of? Most of us, I'm guessing, would think, "God who searches the heart finds all the dark and dirty secrets of the heart and knows how bad we are." Or something like that.

But what Paul is really saying here is: when God searches the heart what God finds is... God's own Holy Spirit in there, and God and the Spirit have a conversation, a prayer meeting, and your heart is the setting for that meeting. God speaking to God's self, in your heart, interceding for you, praying in you and for you. That's a mind-blower. And a beautiful truth.

This brings us full circle to what Jesus said in John 14: after promising the Holy Spirit he said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you... let not your *hearts* be troubled..." Because he knew the Holy Spirit would dwell there. And that God would meet himself there, and begin a holy conversation, and hold prayer meetings in there.

So, sometimes prayer, for us, is simply getting out of the way—setting aside the chatter and words and ideas and thoughts, and simply letting God speak. In the still small voice.

I'd like to encourage each of us to write down, keep a journal of, our experiences, and what we are hearing in our quiet moments of listening. Maybe not every day, but at least two or three times a week. What are you hearing? What is God stirring in your heart? What is being revealed to you? What are you

noticing? What has changed for you, in your heart? What or who do you find you are praying for/about?

I have a feeling that when we are able to come back together and share, we will discover that we hearing similar things. I don't know what that will be. But I do know that God is consistent, and my guess is that we will be hearing similar things from the Lord. So, let's take time in our days ahead to quiet ourselves, and listen for the still small voice.