

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
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Be Still, and Know that I am God **Psalm 46:**

If you are a certain age, I invite you to embarrass your children by saying (or singing) the appropriate lyrics as I say (or even sing!) these words.

“Slow down you move too fast; you’ve got to make the morning last,
just kicking down the cobblestones, looking for fun and _____”
(La,la,la,la,la,la, feelin’ groovy)

”Hello lamp post, what you knowin? I’ve come to watch your flowers growing.
Ain’t ya got no rhymes for me? Doot-in’ doo-doo: _____”
(La,la,la,la,la,la, feelin’ groovy)

Yes, the little ditty known as “Feeling Groovy,” (more correctly known as the 59Th Street Bridge Song”), seems to spring from songwriter Paul Simon on a particularly upbeat day, when he was in a particularly enchanted mood.

Feeling relaxed, in an almost euphoric frame of mind, he wants the world to slow down with him and drink in the little wonders that abound around him even in a cramped urban setting.

Simon’s lyric, “Slow down, you move too fast,” serves as a light contemporary counterpart to the Biblical sentiment of Psalm 46, though, for the Psalmist, slowing down and becoming still is not prescribed as a passing mood, but as a persistent discipline incorporated into one’s daily approach to living.

To quieten one’s spirit and realize that God is indeed our refuge and strength is a great delight and a necessary nourishment.

True, admits the Psalmist, the world is full of violent activity: the world changes, mountains shake, seas tremble, waters roar, nations rage, kingdoms totter, the earth melts --

but God is at work in the world, at times quietly, at times spectacularly, at times obscurely, working to bring peace to tumult, or perhaps working through tumult to bring peace.

To live rightly is to live aware of God’s desire to communicate the divine Presence to us.

To live wisely is to find a way periodically to open our being to receive the directives of God.

To live faithfully is to yield to this non-negotiable command of the divine voice:

“Be still and know that I am God.”

Slow down! You move too fast! This is not optional, but essential to the health of our spirit.

Okay, so maybe I’m not the best person in the world to be counseling you on how to “live slow.”

However, after two weeks of vacation, if ever my remarks on the subject of “being still” are going to have credence, now is the time. Vacations have a way of slowing you down to make you witness things that you otherwise think you are too busy to notice.

During vacation, you find yourself lying on your back in a pool watching clouds parade by overhead. Surely they do so all the time, but to watch this common phenomenon is fascinating.

Makes you wonder what else you are missing.

You find yourself sitting on your porch on a hot summer morning after a long run, simply marveling at how good an ice-cold grape gator-aid tastes, better in that moment than any prize-winning wine. How come I never noticed the stunning taste of a cold grape gator-aid before?

On vacation, you can sit in your boat on a windless ocean at dawn, marveling at the placidity of the sea. As you behold the wonder of the sunrise, the compelling truth of a single, piercing Biblical phrase can send a shudder through the center of your being and thrill your consciousness:
be still and know that I am God.

Sometimes, becoming still enough to perceive God's presence is the product of disciplined intentionality. That was brought home to me in parable fashion this summer, on July 4th.

In the cool of a fading evening I was by myself sitting in my backyard in my camping chair, nigh unto my bird feeder, when out of the trees, flying to the ground near me was a dove, one dove – Biblical symbol of God's peace.

When Noah seeks to find if God's judgment has been removed from the earth, he sends out a dove.

When the Spirit of God falls upon Jesus after his baptism, she descends "like a dove,"

When our Lord counsels his disciples he tells them to be as "innocent as doves." So here comes a dove, taking the risk of coming close to a human being, even as firecrackers resound around us.

I remain perfectly still, because in that moment I sense a fundamental truth about the universe: sometimes God's peace comes to us warily.

Sometimes God's peace only comes to us when we are prepared to receive it in disciplined anticipation.

Sometimes God's peace only comes to those who are still enough to receive it.

As I remain motionless, watchful and expectant, the dove moves closer, her head in constant motion, checking my status; but she comes, and she eats.

In that moment the Word of God becomes flesh for me: be still; *be still* and know that I am God.

Sometimes only the still are able to receive God's peace.

That does not mean, of course, that we can only know God's peace in moments of solitude and languor.

I do not want to imply that we only know God's peace by retreating to a prayer closet or a monastery.

The truth of the universe is, God is always trying to communicate the divine will to us.

The truth of our creation is, we are made, made! to hear God's voice.

The reality of God does not only come to us in moments of beauty and aesthetic wonder.

God's peace can come to us amidst supremely active moments, even amidst terribly unsettling moments when the earth melts, seas foam, mountains tremble, nations rage, and kingdoms totter, we can train our being to be still and apprehend the reality, peace and power of the divine.

Historian David McCullough tells the story of the sad last years of our second president, John Adams.

He had lost his beloved wife and daughter to illness, lost a son to alcoholism,

lost all of his political power and social prominence, lost his health and strength.

Among the few pleasures left to him was adoring the fruit trees around his house.

Yet one night after a horrible ice storm he awakened to find every one of his trees shattered.

This was what he wrote in his diary:

"A rain had fallen from some warmer region in the skies where the cold here below was intense to an extreme. Every drop was frozen wherever it fell in the trees, and clung to the limbs and sprigs as if it had been lashed by hooks of steel.

The icicles on every sprig glowed in all the luster of diamonds. Every tree was a chandelier of cut glass.

I have seen a queen of France with [exquisite diamonds] upon her person. I deem all the charms of her face and figure added to all the glitter of her jewels did not make an impression on me equal to that presented by every shrub. The whole world was glittering with precious stones."

Here was one who had lost his last good pleasure. Everything he cherished was buried or vanished. His last little delight had been taken away.

Yet as he surveyed the terrible brokenness before him, there was no bitterness, but a strange delight and profound appreciation for the mesmerizing beauty of the terrible scene before him. Indeed, as he noted in his diary, John Adams said that the more he learned the skill of contemplation, “the more I feel an irresistible impulse to fall on my knees in adoration of the power that moves, the wisdom that directs, the benevolence that sanctifies this wonderful whole.” He had found that all of life – all! – was grist for the peace and power of God’s presence. He had learned, even in terrible moments, to be still and sense the Godness of God. Not long ago, one of you sent me an email about a young teenager who was dying of cancer. In the email was a poem written by the teen, and preceding her poem was a note from a New York doctor, who said that this terminal teenager had desired that as many people as possible might see her poem that urged people to live their lives to the fullest, since she knew that she would not have the chance to do so. The poem is entitled, “Slow Dance,” and speaks of how the smallest, most insignificant events can communicate life’s beauty and God’s meaning. It goes:

*“Have you ever watched kids on a merry-go-round? Or listened to the rain slapping on the ground?
Ever followed a butterfly’s erratic flight? Or gazed at the sun into the fading night?
You had better slow down. Don’t dance so fast. Time is short. The music won’t last.
Do you run through each day on the fly? When you ask ‘How are you?’ Do you hear the reply?
When the day is done do you lie in your bed, with the next hundred chores running through your head?
You’d better slow down. Don’t dance so fast. Time is short. The music won’t last.
Ever told your child, ‘We’ll do it tomorrow,’ and in your haste not see his sorrow?
Ever lost touch, let a good friendship die, ‘cause you never had time to call and say ‘Hi’?
You’d better slow down. Don’t dance so fast. Time is short. The music won’t last.
When you run so fast to get somewhere, you miss half the fun of getting there.
When you worry and hurry through your day, it is like an unopened gift . . . thrown away.
Life is not a race. Do take it slower. Hear the music -- before the song is over.”*

All of life is grist through which God’s Word can come.

Each little moment can communicate God’s presence and power if only we have the ability to quieten our souls and breathe in God’s insistent message.

Every vacation always brings me some Aha! moment, and this time the moment came on a quiet morning, as my son Stewart and I were fishing on a calm, clear day.

The water that morning was filled with dolphins, and since they are experienced fish finders, we decided to troll along among them. It worked pretty well.

Suddenly I saw something that I have never seen in my half-century of living --

I saw a dolphin flipping a ball in the air.

I thought for a moment that some kid’s beach ball had drifted out to sea; then I realized, no, the water was filled with these Australian jelly balls, spherical blobs of jelly fish that have no tentacles. The dolphin was simply using his snout to flip these jelly balls into the air.

There was no clapping crowd, no trainer dispensing rewards, nothing but a dolphin turning the world around him into a toy – and seemingly grinning as he was doing it. I laughed like a delighted child.

I have known many a wise scholar and learned theologian, but I am not sure any of them have sensed the secret of happiness as profoundly as has that singular creative creature.

“Got no deeds to do, no promises to keep; I’m dappled and drowsy and ready to sleep;

Let the morning time drop all its petals on me; Life I love you – all is groovy.”

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

Be still and know that God is God.
No other skill will enrich your life as much.

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