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“The Intimation of the Object of Our Faith”
Psalm 46:1-3; 10-11

The Psalmist in our text this morning is making a proclamation about God. When the world is swirling, when all else fails God is still present. God is present to provide strength and help. When there is no security in our external circumstances God provides internal support. To know this one has to be still. As God says in the text, “Be still and know that I am God.” And while the Psalmist may not have audibly heard these words, he has experienced them in reality. In his stillness he has sensed God’s presence and he invites his hearers to do the same. There are two things the Psalmist makes clear in the text. One, God is the object of our faith. And two, God is a reality that can be experienced.

The original historical setting for this passage of Scripture was likely that it was a Psalm of praise delivered after Jerusalem withstood a siege by the Assyrians in 701 BC. There are two post-biblical notes of history regarding this Psalm. First, it has a somewhat odd sort of connection to Shakespeare. I suspect it is simply coincidence, but if you read the 46th Psalm in the King James Version, and are willing to do some counting, you will see that the 46th word from the beginning is “shake,” and the 46th word from the end is “spear.” Second, is that it is this Psalm which inspired Martin Luther to write the hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” The tune is often played at funerals as the family of the deceased enters the sanctuary, signifying that God is with us providing support amidst the storms of life.

On our high school mission trip two weeks ago we worked with another church, First Baptist Bradfordville, in leading Bible school in Miami. On several evenings we did devotions with them. On another night we did tributes for our graduated high school seniors on our own. When it was my turn to lead devotions for everyone I addressed an issue that I thought was relevant for the week and that particularly troubled me when I was preparing to go off to college – the transitory nature of life. And at the time it was a shock to my system to be separated from everyone that I had known and loved up to that point. Of course some of these relationships continued but many were not quite the same, and only a few of them continue to this day. Indeed, the only one who is always with us is God alone. Yet with time and perspective I began to see that we can still be blessed by those who are no longer a part of our ongoing existence. There are those who have shaped us in ways we recognize and in ways we don’t. I am willing to bet that there are people who no longer a part of your life that you are grateful you have known. To me, the fact that such relationships still have meaning to us points to the reality and presence of God. And my point to the youth was that even though we would only be in Miami for one week, we could still give and receive blessings from others. We could still impart and receive something of God. Yet, we can only come to peace with it if we have faith in God. Seen through the eyes of faith all of our relationships matter. I have to say here that I think that the world needs more of a sense of this.

I suspect many of you have at least in passing heard about the book [Three Cups of Tea](#). It’s a remarkable story of a man named Greg Mortenson that begins with his failed attempt to climb the mountain K2. After admitting to himself that couldn’t make it to the top, he descended disoriented and oxygen deprived until he stumbled almost lifeless into the village of Korphe in Pakistan. No foreigner had ever entered that isolated village before, but he was welcomed and nursed back to health by the

villagers there. And while the hospitality of the villagers moved him greatly (and probably saved his life) it was his visit to the village school that changed his life. There he saw 82 unsupervised children, only four of them girls, kneeling down in the frost-covered ground using sticks to scratch multiplication tables in the dirt. Upon seeing this, Mortenson vowed to the village chief that one day he would return to Korphe and build a school. Back in America, while living out of his car for a year, while contacting 580 philanthropists and applying for 16 grants, Mortenson received \$723.45 – a \$100 check from Tom Brokaw and \$623.45 raised by children at one elementary school. But he finally got a break when a former mountain climber turned businessman agreed to give him the \$12,000 needed to build the school. Mortenson returned to Korphe and with the help of the villagers built that school. He has since established the Central Asia Institute and gone on to build 58 more schools in rural Pakistan and Afghanistan. These schools help the local people to do more than barely scratch out a meager existence. These schools support more than 520 teachers, and serve some 24,000 students (over 14,000 of them girls – almost unheard of in the male-dominated Islamic society). How did he do it? He did it by getting to know and understand real people, by developing a relationship and earning their trust. It was these people who helped to soothe things over with the local warlords and they helped him overcome the religious and social barriers that he encountered. It has been reasonably argued that his efforts have done more to combat terrorism than all the relief aid that has been sent to Pakistan. Money and good intentions are great, even needed, but they do not make the difference that personal encounters do. Actually caring about the people and not simply our own security interests makes a difference. Even if you have some skepticism to this approach, consider this – Big money from Islamic extremists in Saudi Arabia has also noticed the plight of the poor in the Himalayas, and the schools that they build don't simply educate, they indoctrinate with a particular brand of Islamic fundamentalism designed to create willing terrorists. But for Mortenson it was his relationship to the people that inspired his efforts.

To this point I have spoken of God as the object of our faith and the value of personal relationships. Yet, to be sure, we can and do have faith in other things. Certain Saudis have faith in their money, and they have seen the results that can be had by it. I suspect we all have faith in the value of education. We know that it is both empowering and can open the doors of opportunity. Some of us still have faith in the stock market and believe that it will rebound since it has always done so before. And of course there are other things such as popularity, appearance, and achievement. They will generally get us acceptance and attention. So we have faith in things other than God and not without reason. We have faith in them because we have experience with them and see the effects such things can have. In and of themselves these things are not bad things, they are simply lesser things. Yet it is easy for them to complicate and frustrate our living when we have more faith in them than we do in God. They can become problematic when they become the primary object of our faith, when they become the center of our thoughts and actions, when they become, in the theologian Paul Tillich's words, our "ultimate concern." The object of our faith, our ultimate concern - that is our god.

"Be still and know that I am God."

Before I put Wilson and Warren to bed at night, I bathe them and then read to them. They know the ritual and they often try to delay bath time because they know it is the start of going to bed. But having overcome that obstacle I then read to them. We read things like Dr. Suess and Thomas the Tank Engine. I prefer books with a rhyme and cadence. After some familiarity with a book I will read a line and then have Wilson supply me the last word that rhymes. But the thing I've learned about reading to the boys is this – For them it matters only a little if I am into the book or not. For them it matters if I am into them. It is this sense of connectedness that provides them with the assurance they need to go to sleep peacefully. They know whether or not I am into them or just want to finish the

book so I can put them to bed and do something else. They don't have to be told. They can sense it. And what is more valuable than this sense of connectedness? What could you replace it with? A toy spaceship? A stuffed animal? M & M's? I am actually naming things they like, but they are inadequate replacements. My friends, you and I are children of God! It is this same sort of connectedness that we need in order to be at peace. It is this connectedness with God that helps us to weather the storms of life. God does not prevent the storms from happening. But "though the earth should change and the mountains shake...God is our refuge and strength." (Psalm 46:2&1)

"Be still and know that I am God." How do we really know God? By being still long enough to listen to our lives, by sharing our lives with fellow believers, by coming together for the ritual of worship, that's how we gradually come to know God. The reality of God becomes known as we open ourselves to it. God is not always so easily read on the surface of things, but is discerned by eyes that see and ears that hear what is deeply incarnate in the nature of things. And even then, as the Apostle Paul has said, "we see through a mirror darkly" (I Corinthians 13:12). But the true mark of knowledge is that it is aware of its limitations and is open to further discovery. And that is what the life of faith is about, a deepening relationship with God. Only through sustained and repeated contact can we begin to attune our human spirits with God's Holy Spirit. It is then that we gain an intimation of what God is telling us. And it is the relationship itself that gives the strength to weather the storms of life.

Well today is a Communion Sunday, so I will close with an image from the final hours of Christ. He was being led away to his death on the cross. "Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, 'Father, Forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.'" Luke 23:32-34) Even at the hour of his impending death Our Lord was attuned to the Holy Spirit of his Father.