

“Helping Our Children Heal From Violence”

Psalm 46: 1-11

“Be Still and Know...that I am God”. These very words capture the heart of Psalm 46. They also capture the very heart of our faith. They affirm for us that God is in the process. They speak to all the ways God overcomes the chaos that fills our world. These very simple ordinary words speak to us when all else fails. “Be Still and Know that I am God”-just by saying these words, a light begins to fill our hearts, offering us healing and hope, guiding us, leading us. These very words tell us time and time again that we can always count on our God. No matter what, we can always count on our God. Even if we are going through the most difficult and darkest of times, we hear these words from Psalm 46 and we know that we can always count on our God.

Be Still and Know that I am God...these very words are how it all begins. Each and every week, when children from around the world, gather for worship and wonder, they sing the very song our choir did for their introit this morning. The children begin their worship experience not with loud noises or praise or thanksgiving. Sure, those things are in their worship service but they come later.

To begin worship, the children simply start with a reminder that Our God is our refuge and strength, that our God is in the process. When children gather for worship and wonder, they start with a reminder that there is nothing to fear because our God is God.

As I have lived with this text this past week, I have often wondered why don't we start our big people worship like that? Why don't we start with a reminder that no matter what our week brings, God is here, that we aren't here to bring our wants and needs first but rather we come to this place, seeking sanctuary from the chaos of the world. We come to hear once again the call for us to reorient our lives towards God's grace and God's love. Why don't we start each and every week, each and every day, with the invitation that allows God's very presence to be the very center of our lives? It would be interesting to give this a try...but that's a different sermon for a different day.

Today, we are here to celebrate Children's Sabbath. I was reminded this past week that usually this celebration is uplifting and well...happy. Our Children's Sabbath celebration is a time when we lift up the children and youth who are a part of our congregation as well as recognizing our call to care for the youth and children of our community. Usually our Children's Sabbath celebration, is a time for us to recommit ourselves to being advocates for all children, naming the issues of poverty and hunger that affect millions of children across our nation and world.

It is a time to seek and to work for justice so that all of God's children experience the God-bearing potential of light and love that resides deep within all our hearts. Usually our Children's Sabbath celebrations are uplifting and happy.

But this year...well this year...it is kind of depressing. I understand that when the choir practiced the hymns on Wednesday night, all of them thought I had lost my mind because I had decided to choose these particular hymns.

I know...I know. I get it. We don't come to church to be depressed or to hear more bad news of hurt and hate. We come to church to be uplifted, to be spiritually renewed. We come to church to find some small bit of good news that will sustain us as we go through the week.

But what do we get this week...hymns that lament the killing of children and youth, prayers that name the injustice of poverty and violence that so many of our children and youth are facing nowadays, and this sermon...a sermon that doesn't let us avoid the harsh reality that...In a 2011(just five years ago) a nationally-representative sample of youth in grades 9-12 was taken and here is what the researchers found• that 32.8% of the youth in this sample reported being in a physical fight in the 12 months preceding the survey; the prevalence being higher among males (40.7%) than females (24.4%). The researchers also discovered that 16.6% of the youth reported carrying a weapon (gun, knife or club) on one or more

days in the 30 days preceding the survey; the prevalence being higher among males (25.9%) than females (6.8%). That 5.1% of the youth in this survey reported carrying a gun on one or more days in the 30 days preceding the survey; the prevalence being higher among males (8.6%) than females (1.4%).

And that since June of 2014, (in the last two years) there have been 34 school shootings...34 school shootings in which children and youth have been killed, 34 shootings in one of the places that we all assumed would be the safest for our children. In the last two years, gun violence has shattered the innocence that we all assumed surrounded our schools, transforming them from places of laughter and learning into places of darkness and hurt.

These may just seem like facts and figures on a page to many of us, but in all honesty, these facts and figures describe the harsh reality of life for so many children and youth who live in our nation and in our world.

As I looked over these facts and figures, I began to feel my age, old in my bones, weariness in my soul. I can remember where I was on April 20th, 1999 when the news broke about the Columbine high school shooting. I can remember where I was on April 16th, 2007 when the news broke about the shooting at Virginia Tech. I can remember where I was on December 14th, 2013 when the news broke about the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary.

I can even remember where I was the moment I realized the term “school violence” no longer described that rare occasion in our country but rather described what seems to be turning into an everyday occurrence. I was sitting in my office this past Friday morning, working on this sermon, scrolling through a list of all the acts of school violence that have ever happened in our country. The first one being in 1764 in Pennsylvania when a group of Native Americans came into a one room school house, killed the school master and nine children. 3 children survived.

When I first read that, I immediately thought...that was a different time and age, that was so long ago, and nothing like what our children face today. I made excuses like “Well, that was during colonial times, everyone knew that there was danger out on the “frontier”...but the list continued, offering incident after incident of school violence from the 1800s, the early 1900s, and the mid-1900s. I began to reach the 1960s and recognize other acts of school violence like the shooting at the University of Texas in Austin where a student climbed the observation deck and began a 96 minute shooting rampage where he killed seventeen people and wounded thirty-one. Or the 1970s when the protest killings at Kent State occurred. The acts of school violence continued into the 1980s and the 1990s, including the 1997 shooting at Health High School in Paducah, KY. There was even an incident listed from my hometown of Greensboro, NC. A student who had been suspended

for smoking returned to school with a 9mm pistol. He wounded the assistant principle before taking his own life.

But the list didn't end. It kept going into the early 2000's and continued to present day.

At first, when I looked at this list, this list that included every act of school violence that has ever occurred in our country, there were huge gaps between each incidents but soon as I continued to scroll through them, the gaps between the incidents began to shrink. The listing of the events became closer and closer together...5 years, a year, 6 months, 3 months, 1 month....10 days...2 days...

2 days between acts of school violence. That's not even enough time for us to wrap our minds around what is going on before it happened again.

And these are just the acts of violence at our schools. I haven't even mentioned the mass shootings in Dallas and Orlando that happened this past summer. I haven't even mentioned the rest of the violence that seems to be overtaking our world...like wars in Syria where just this past month, 100 children were killed or in places like Mosul, where children fleeing the latest wave of fighting are dying of thirst or being killed by landmines. I haven't even mentioned all the incidents that happened this past year when bodies of refugee children and

babies washed upon the shore because there was no safe harbor or passage for their boats.

Yeah, I get it. It is depressing. But this, this is the world we live in nowadays. We live in a world where information is quick and always available, where the more disturbing the news is, the better, because after all, how else are the media outlets going to get our attention.

This is the world we live in...a world where our voices cry out to God and ask, "How Long O God must we wait for Your Kingdom to come?" We live in a world where a voice is heard in Ramah, full of lamentation and bitterness, for Rachel is weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children because they are no more. This is the chaos and sadness that fills our world.

Yeah, I get it...We don't come to church to be depressed. We come to be uplifted and renewed.

But you see, Charleston changed all that. A man walked into a church while people were studying the Word of God and shoot nine people. That incident in June of 2015 changed how we perceive our churches. No longer are our church sanctuaries a place where we can hide from the world. No longer can we pretend the violence is out there and we are safe in here. No longer can we ignore the incidents of brokenness and hate that seem to know no end.

As people of faith, we live in a world that is in chaos and that chaos is spilling over into every part of our lives, including into our churches. We don't know where to turn. It seems like the very foundation of our Earth is shaking. It seems like the very nations of our world are tottering. It seems like everything and everyone is in chaos.

So yeah...I get it.

Yet still...I offer these words, "Be Still and Know that I am God" "Be Still and Know that I am God." "Be Still and Know that I am God."

These words are not just positive thinking for me. They are a spiritual exercise for me, for us, for all of God's people. We breathe them in and we breathe them out. And with each word that passes our lips, we are encouraged. We are strengthened. With each word that we sing of this song, with each word that is lifted up in prayer to our God, with each word that is given as a testimony, we are able to face the darkness and say...We will not fear.

Because you see, I know, you know, We know as the people of God, that when everything and everyone is in chaos, God is moving in that chaos. God is moving across that empty void, calming the waters. God is moving, separating the light from the dark...speaking these words... "Let there be light. Let there be life."

I know, you know, we all know as the people of God, that when everything and everyone is in chaos, there is only one point of stability for us. It is a point in which we take refuge. When everything is in chaos, there is a presence that moves among us, strengthening us, time and time again. This presence that is our very center and our core...the love and light of God.

And we have to look no farther than the ending of the psalm to know it is true. When we look at verse 8 and 9, we will be the first to admit that they don't quite seem to go together. After all, we've been invited to behold the works of God and then we get desolation and destruction. That certainly isn't the God we have all come to know and have experienced in our lives.

But I invite us to look again and remember things are not always what they seem when we are dealing with matters of hope and faith. In verse 9, the desolation that God brings stands diametrically opposed to the desolation and destruction that we have come to expect from this world. Unlike our world's answer to violence...an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth....We as people of faith are invited to experience the life-giving promise of what will happen to the brokenness, to the hate, to the hurt when God's Kingdom truly comes to be on earth as it is in heaven....Wars will cease. Weapons of violence will be no more and all will be at peace.

These are not just words for us. These words are the very heart of our faith. They are a promise that God is and will always be among the people of God. These very words remind us over and over again that God's purpose for God's creation, God's plan for God's children has been, is now and forever will be to establish peace, to be among the people of God, and to always, always overcome the chaos by bringing forth light and life.

And we have to look no farther than the empty tomb to know that this is true...

So today and all days, may these words strengthen us, encourage us as we sing them together... "Be Still and Know that I am God. Be Still And Know that I am God. Be still and Know that I am God." Amen.