

Sermon 7-20-25
Paul Purdue preaching

It was 2am and my buddies and I were playing cards at my parents' house, our normal high school haunt. Someone decided to pour their Mountain Dew into a wine glass, wet their finger and run it around the rim of the glass manufacturing an annoying hum. We all tried the trick, emptying the china cabinet, changing the fluid levels to experiment with different tones and pitches. Chris could conjure a hum with each hand. In the midst of our hideous sympathy, suddenly the upstairs door flew open crashing into the wall. My dad stood two steps up in a white T-shirt and boxers. His partial plate in a cup, his glasses on a night stand, his farmer tan legs blinding us, his neatly groomed salt and pepper hair flying off in 500 directions. Dad groggily growled one word "*Bed!*" Brian, always ready with a wise crack, asked with phony politeness, "Mr. Purdue, what would you like us to do?" Dad, now more awake and angry, cocked his finger, summoned his drill sergeant days, and roared, "*BED! GO TO BED*" There was no reason to tempt fate. We raced to clear the table, turn out the lights, and turn into bed. Once safely in our beds, we suppressed our laughter at the sight of my dad, only releasing our laughter at breakfast. Dad's "Bed, go to Bed" became legendary.

We usually think of "*Be still and know that I am the lord*" as a gentle whisper calling us to quietly contemplate God's still small voice. Scholars tell us it is more of a roar than a gentle prayer. "*Stop it, knock it off, quit that!*"

The psalmist paints a picture of a living, active, and disruptive God. God breaks into our tottering, teetering, tweeting world and roars "*STOP IT!*" The Psalmist prophesied a day when God breaks the warriors bow. God shatters the soldier's spear. God collects the army's shields and tosses them into a bonfire. Amid our violent chaos God shouts: *Stop it! Desist! Drop your weapons! Knock it off. Be still and know that I am God!* (The New Interpreters Bible Commentary)

Scholars invite us to think of the Psalm 46 liturgy as a call to imagine the worst case scenario. What is the worst scenario you can imagine? Like us, our ancient Hebrew ancestors wanted to understand the universe's mysteries- they wondered what keeps the sky afloat? In 2025, scientists are wrestling to explain the "dark matter" that makes up 85% of the universe, but today's science builds on the questions our ancestors explored. 3000 years ago the people of the Mediterranean basin reasoned that as a tent is held up by its poles, the sky was held up by the mountains. So when the mountains shook and the sea roared with hurricane force they worried that the very pillars of the earth might fail and the sky could come crashing down around them. *The mountains totter and shake, the sea waters roar and foam, the earth collapses.* Psalm 46 calls us to imagine a terrifying climate disaster, but then to rehearse our response, "*Even then, we will not be afraid*". Before the worst moment comes we practice saying, "*we will not be afraid*".

Psalm 46 invokes the worst case kind of political disaster. *"The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms are tottering"* And what do we say in response to political chaos: *"We will not be afraid"*

When everything is shaking, quaking, breaking, foaming, and roaring .The ancient liturgy teaches us the refrain: *"We will not be afraid"*

*God is with us
STOP IT. Be still, and Know I am the Lord
The Lord is with us
God is in the city
God is our refuge and strength
God is always present to help us amid the worst case scenario
Therefore we will not fear*

But with everything that is going on in the world, is it reasonable to not be afraid?
Friends, is it possible we can feel afraid, and yet choose to be not afraid?

In 1949 Howard Thurmond, the grandson of enslaved peoples, asked if Christianity had anything to offer long-oppressed and disinherited black people like him? Rev. Dr. Thurmond argued that the original authentic Christian vision is *"a technique for the survival of the oppressed."* Thurmond argued that the powerful people and systems had gutted Jesus's teachings, even twisting Christianity into a tool of oppression, but *"whenever Jesus's spirit appears the oppressed find fresh courage, for Christ announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy and hatred. These three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited need have no domain over them."* (Jesus and the Disinherited).

Thurmond taught that even when the worst case scenario appears, *"we will not be afraid"* because at our core: we are children of God. Be Still and know: *God is our refuge and strength.*

A person's conviction that they are God's child automatically tends to shift the basis of their relationship with all other people. (God's children) recognize that to fear another human, whatever may be that person's power over them, is a basic denial of the integrity of their very life. (Fear of another person) lifts a mere human to an (unwarranted) place of pre-eminence that belongs to God and to God alone... To the child of God, a scale of values becomes available by which all people are measured and their true significance determined. (Thurmond saw Matthew 25 as the measure of everyone's life) Even the threat of vio-lence, with the possibility of death that it carries, is recognized for what it is-merely the threat of violence with a death potential. Such people recognize that death cannot possibly be the worst thing in the world. There are some things that are worse than death. To deny one's own integrity of personality in the presence of the human challenge is one of those things. "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do," says Jesus".

We are not afraid because death is not the worst case scenario, neither is ridicule or *"having people say all manner of evil against you."* The worst thing in life is denying *"the integrity of our personhood"* : losing our core identity as a child of God. This knowledge silences fear, hypocrisy and hatred. The worst thing that can happen to us is to live life for something less than love, to give our lives over to principalities, powers and possessions that deny our human dignity or impede human rights. Friends, when we stop loving our neighbors with the same love we long for ourselves, we are slouching towards spiritual death.

Thurmond reminds us of Matthew 10, where Jesus says *"I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise and innocent. Beware, they will hand you over to local councils, church trials, governors and kings. Do worry about what you say, God will speak through you. But, it will be bad. You will be hated because of my message! Remember how they treated me? So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered and nothing secret that will not become known. Speak up! Endure! Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot touch your soul; rather, fear the one who has the power to destroy both soul and body in hell. (What is that One like?) Well, aren't two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from God's compassion. Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not be afraid; you are far more valuable than many sparrows. (adapted)*

Jesus' message of good news for poor people, enough for everyone, welcome for strangers and goodwill for enemies makes some oppressors mad, maybe violent. Do not be afraid. There are things worse than death. Be still. Be steadfast. Be immovable. Be courageous. Be not afraid. Be humane. Be you. Be a child of God. Be a Christlike. Remember your baptism.

Thurmond writes: *The awareness that a person is a child of God, creates a profound faith in life that nothing can destroy.. Of course God cares for the grass of the field, which lives a day and is no more, or the sparrow that falls unnoticed by the wayside. God also holds the stars in their appointed places, and leaves a mark in every living thing. And God cares for me! To be assured of this becomes the answer to the threat of violence- yea, to violence itself. To the degree to which a person knows this, they become unconquerable from within and without."*

As a young child Howard Thurmond saw Haley's Comet and worried that the galactic fireball might fall out of the sky and crash to earth. He shared his fears with his mother, she paused and slowly said *"Nothing will happen to us, Howard; God will take care of us."* Howard wrote *"O simplehearted mother of mine, in one glorious moment you put your heart on the ultimate affirmation of the human spirit. Many things have I seen since that night. Times without number I have learned that life is hard, as hard as crucible steel; but as the years have unfolded, the majestic power of my mother's glowing words has come back again and again, beating out its rhythmic chant in my own spirit. Here is the faith and the awareness that overcome fear and transform it into the power to strive, to achieve, and not to yield."*

Oh friends, when the chaos is spinning around us, when the mountains shake, and the nations are in an uproar, will we rehearse our refrain: *"We will be not afraid because..."*

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in these troubling times.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God comes to break the bows, shatter the spears, and burn the shields.
God will help us when the dawn arrives
The Lord of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge and strength.
Therefore, we will not be afraid.
"Stop! Be still, and know that I am God! Amen.*