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Summer Road Trip Through the Psalms 7. Getting There

Psalm 46 Adapted from the RSV God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God will help her right early. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; God speaks, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Come, behold the works of the LORD, how God has wrought desolations in the earth, making wars cease to the end of the earth, breaking the bow, shattering the spear, burning the chariots with fire! "Be still, and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!" The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge

Well, we did it. All summer we've been "on the road," using the Psalms as our guide to our journey through this life. We've gotten ready, we've made our plans, we've altered our plans, we've found food, we've gotten surprised, we've gotten re-routed, we've sometimes recalculated both our route and our destination. And now we're nearly done. We began this series noting that "road trips" are perhaps the quintessentially American activity and that they have birthed dozens of songs about getting on the road; remember them? "See the USA in your Chevrolet," or Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again," or seemingly every Beach Boys song ever written. But now we're almost done, we're headed home and we realize that there also many, many songs about home.¹ Simon and Garfunkel's now-iconic "Homeward Bound" is almost fifty years old, but still is hauntingly beautiful. [\[Play clip\]](#) One of the Beatles' lesser-known songs, "Two of Us," is a jaunty ode to going home. [\[Play clip\]](#) Bruce Springsteen sings, as only he can, with melancholy nostalgia about his hometown [\[Play](#)

¹On my Facebook page, I crowdsourced the question of what songs people would suggest that referenced the word "home." I received a score of responses, got to listen to music that I didn't know, and re-learned that my music preferences tend to be stuck in the 1960s :) I can't possibly cite all the instances provided but I'm grateful for all the suggestions!

[clip](#)] And of course who hasn't sung along to Colorado adopted son John Denver's melodic evocation of the joy of going home [\[Play clip\]](#) More recently, singer and "American Idol" winner Phillip Phillips sings of how home means you're not alone: [\[Play clip\]](#) Finally, our former Regional Minister, Dean Phelps, sings that old gospel hymn about going to one's eternal home [\[Play clip\]](#).

Home. There may be no more freighted word in the English language. Advertisers trade on its power incessantly. At Christmas time, if sentimental movies about going home were somehow made illegal, the Hallmark Channel would have nothing to show. In the mid-20th century, many mortuaries re-branded themselves as "funeral homes," seeking to trade on the power of that word during a family's most difficult time. *Home*. Poets long for it, faraway soldiers miss it, couples dream of how they will build one together. For many, hopefully most, the emotional and memory associations with "home" are both powerful and positive. For some, though, "home" is fraught with other kinds of memories that do not speak of love but of fearfulness: those whose homes were full of conflict or abuse or lovelessness may flinch more than fawn at the mention of "home," but even they still dream and hope for a different kind of home, where love will indeed be re-born.

Home. *Home*. We even use it, of course, in talking about our faith and in talking about church. Although beliefs about the specifics may differ, virtually every Christian believes that at the end of our earthly life's journey is some sort of eternal "home" with God. Obituaries often write of someone's "going home." As far as church goes, if we summon up the courage to ask our new neighbor or friend or co-worker whether they might be interested in attending church with us, we may very well ask them the question "Do you have a church *home*?"

But, my friends, we need to oh-so-careful when we use this word when talking about either faith or church. Consider our Psalm for today, the final one for our summer

sermon series. It does not use the word “home,” but I believe that that is finally what it is about. It describes the place that God would all have us get to, the things that God would have us all know. It tells us about who God is and it tells us something about what we need to do in response to that news. The Psalm both begins and ends by telling us that God is our *refuge* – and that, of course, is often indeed a word used to describe what home should be like. It tell us that even in the worst of life, when life itself trembles and shakes, when what was thought to be solid gives way and turns to dust, God is the one who is and will be our strength. Unlike poet Robert Frost’s description of home – *“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in”* – the Psalmist is describing a home, a refuge where you are not simply tolerated, but wanted and loved. And its penultimate line is one that has brought comfort and hope to many: *“Be still, and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!”*

So why is it that we need to be careful? Well, let’s talk about God first. Under the influence of our too-often-narcissistic age, when “self-care” is all the rage and seemingly something that you are entitled to no matter what, that admonition to “be still and know that I am God” can too often be heard as a justification for disengaging from God’s world. Too often too many folks seem to act as if the entirety of the phrase is actually “Be still” – and they forget that that “stillness” is in the service of knowing and serving a God who is indeed your refuge and your strength, but Who is not your excuse for withdrawing from caring about and seeking to love those whom God loves, those whom, like it or not, God has made you brothers and sisters with. God never takes you in except to prepare you for being sent back out. No, the “stillness” that is commended and commanded here is precisely for you to be reminded that even in the midst of the worst that life can offer, even in the midst of a world gone crazy sometimes, it is God whose love, whose care, whose justice will win out. As one writer puts it, commenting

on the historical context in which this Psalm was written, “Be still”

...is specifically addressed to the survivors of a war torn nation, people that on all sides continued to feel threatened. To those scared to death by what was going on all around them... the sovereign Lord encourages them to stop their trembling.... “In this explosive context, ‘be still’ is not an invitation to tranquil meditation but a command to allow God to be God, to do his [sic] work of abolishing the weapons of war.” ... In the end, the sovereign God will defeat war and end terrorism.²

In other words, the stillness we are enjoined to, the refuge we are reminded of, is that of a God whose character is one of patient, persistent, overwhelming love which shall finally overcome evil, which is not tempted to undeserved coercion and violence, and which works ceaselessly that all might be loved and all might know justice. In the stillness we are to be reminded that nothing in all creation will separate us from God’s love, will overpower God’s love, will deter God’s love.

And that is indeed a wondrous refuge to be able to flee to, a life-giving thing to know. It means, as I said in an earlier sermon, that we can give up the job of being general manager of the universe for things just do not depend on our sometimes meager and imperfect strivings. God-as-refuge is another way of saying that Biblical counsel that is so often repeated throughout the Testaments: Be not afraid, be not afraid. But, to return to where we started, this strong and blessed assurance ought never be taken as license for disengaging from God’s world. God needs us. God needs us to be the divine hands and voice in helping speed that justice and love for all. God needs us to witness to those who don’t know that God is love unconditional for

²Ken Silva <http://apprising.org/2012/09/24/be-still-contemplative-or-listening-prayer-7-psalm-4610/>
The quote within this quote is from Craig Broyles. I confess that I don’t quite understand the internecine dispute that is the occasion for Silva’s article or its jeremiad against “new age meditation.” But his exegetical point about the context for the Psalmist’s assertion seems on-target to me.

each and all. It's worth remembering those lines from St. Teresa of Avila which I shared a few weeks ago: "*Christ has no body now on earth but yours, No hands but yours, No feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through Christ looks with compassion on the world; Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.*"

But that brings us, then, to the nature of the church and realizing that the warning against misunderstanding this Psalm is also a warning for the church. Not long ago, I saw someone post on their Facebook page these lines: "*I'm so glad I have my church. I can go there and totally ignore the world. I can shut out all the terrible things that are happening. I can see my friends and hear the music that I like. When I go into the sanctuary, it is like I am escaping.*" What's wrong with this picture? Just this: such escaping is simply not the purpose of the Church that was founded by the Holy Spirit so long ago. The purpose of the church, as commanded by Jesus and as recounted by the story of Pentecost, is to make disciples. That was Jesus' very clear commandment. The writer of the Pentecost story would not have mentioned that 3000 people became believers if he hadn't understood that the purpose of the church was not simply to have, in Gay Hatler's phrase, our "holy huddles," but to invite people who do not know God to come to know God.

The word "sanctuary" literally means "a holy place." But it is not holy because it takes us out of the world. It is not holy because here we get to see our friends. It is not holy because it is the place where in worship all our preferences are satisfied. No, this space, this entry point into the refuge that the Psalmist talks about is not a sanctuary *from* the world, but a sanctuary *for* the world. It is where we get ourselves re-oriented in worship. It is where we get re-equipped and refreshed and renewed to go out into the world. So, when we take refuge in God, when we come into the house of God, when we come to this our "church home," it is always and ever to be *reminded* of some very important things and *equipped* to do some very important things:

- It is to be reminded that God loves everyone, of whatever nationality or race or ethnicity or orientation just as much as God loves each of us, and therefore we have no license ever for bigotry of any sort.
- It is to be reminded that in some ways the Biblical story, from beginning to end, is the story of being commanded to welcome the stranger and show hospitality to the immigrant.
- It is to be reminded that violence is never to be a first resort and that a culture that celebrates and even idolizes guns and refuses to protect its babies from them grieves God.
- It is to be reminded that the Jews and Muslims are our spiritual cousins, sharing a common ancestry and a common book and a common story and therefore vandalism and violence and vigilantism directed against them is anathema to God.
- It is to be reminded that we are expected – expected! – to reach out and offer a witness in our lives and our words to so many people who do not know the love of Jesus Christ.

We've finished our trip. We have gotten there. We have come home. And this journey through the Psalms has taught us that, indeed God – as God always does and always will – welcomes us and says “I will be your refuge and your strength.” Not to escape the world, but to better love this world. Welcome home!