

“Practice Makes Progress”

Psalm 46: 1-11
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Putting things in order: First thing in the morning, what do you do? Many of us have to turn off that irritating alarm clock. At that point we may feel irritated and groggy. Some of us wake up and bounce out of bed. I guess it all depends on how much sleep we have had, whether we are ill, or dealing with other problems.

Whatever state we come out of our sleep, it is helpful that we put things in order to start the day. Just like a runner who is in the starting block and waiting for the gun, it is necessary to get your feet well positioned in the blocks and ready to go forward.

In the quiet of the morning, give thanks. I have been in the Spiritual practice to give thanks to God and acknowledge again every morning the miracle of life. I have learned to do this even when I do not feel like it. In that quiet moment of ‘coming-to’, our minds can quickly be filled with anxieties about the day. Acknowledging the awesomeness of life helps to lead us to acknowledge the presence of the giver of life - God.

The practice of acknowledging God’s presence helps us to makes progress in diminishing fear. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear (Psalm 46:1-2a).” This love of God casts out fear. “There is no fear in love because perfect love casts out fear (I John 4: 18).”

Our scripture lesson for today, Psalm 46 was written by David at the time when the Assyrians invaded Judah and it helped the Israelites be reminded and assured of God’s deliverance.

Acknowledge what God is doing: *The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. What are these desolations? Answer: He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. (Psalm 46: 7-9).* God destroys the things that cause fear, such as war!

After we read what God was doing there, God says to the Israelites (and to us today) in the words of Psalm 46:

Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted (honoured) among the nations. I am exalted (honoured) in the earth.” (Psalm 46:10) It is important that we stop, and are silent and assess what God is doing all around us.

I need to stop and restart my computer from time to time when it starts to run slowly or inefficiently. If a virus gets into my computer I have to refer to Duane to reset the system to make the computer operate efficiently again. In a similar way, the virus of fear can debilitate. Stop and allow the Lord to reset your mind, your will and your emotions every morning before engaging in your daily activities. You will then remain strong in the knowledge of God’s love and presence with you in spite of the challenges ahead in your day.

Put intervals of solitude in your daily life: As you stop in this time of silence and take a break from the busyness and distractions of life, it is helpful to build spiritual habits to

encourage you to be closer with God. Over a period of time, our faith can become dry and feel stuck. We may find that our connection with Christ is once or twice a week, and not a daily relationship. One of the church patriarchs, Ignatius, says that God is everywhere and can be experienced every day and wherever we are. In the spiritual practice of the '*Ignatian Examen*', one asks oneself or asks another person - *where did you see God today?* Another question would be - *where did you not see God today?* In this practice, there are various questions one can ask. However, the goal for those participating in this practice is to pay attention to where God is present and to discern God's direction for their lives. In that awareness, one is drawn into a closer relationship with God. Asking these questions daily makes the practice become habitual. It is important to be disciplined to practice if one desires to develop this spiritual practice.

Practice makes progress: One can learn all about swimming. One can hear a lecture about treading water, the different kinds of strokes, and breathing, but until you jump into the water, you will not make progress. The same could be said for Spiritual practices. It is good to learn about different practices, but before one can experience the benefits, one must actually do it.

The spiritual practices we have been discussing in our book, *The Sacred Way*, are meant to be Christ centred, to help us build habits of blocking out the noise and distractions of life. The practice itself is not the focus (or what is worshipped), but rather, a means *through* which we experience a closer relationship with Christ.

Another spiritual practice is using icons alongside prayer and meditation. It is important to remember that in the stillness of prayer and meditation we do not worship the icons, but they are images *through* which we are reminded of the power of God's sacrificial love for you. Icons such as the cross and images of Christ are visible expressions of the invisible God. It is permissible for us to use these images because God became visible when he became a man in His Son Jesus Christ ("*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*" *Colossians 1: 15*).

We practice silence/solitude in worship: In worship, we take the time in our noisy culture to be quiet and reflective on our week, and listen to God. In our busy, hectic world, where there is little silence, we are brought back in worship to be still and know who God is and who we are in relationship to our loving God.

Jesus gets up from a deep sleep and forms faith in his disciples (Mark 4: 35-41). Jesus must have been deep in sleep for him to doze through the storm! When he was awakened by his disciples, he must have been a little groggy like we are first thing in the morning. Yet, he went right to work to put things in order by calming the storm. Our prayer first thing each morning of acknowledging the gift of life and giving thanks to God, widens our perspective to see God who calms the storms and brings peace. God may not deliver you out of the storm but you will be aware of the power of God's love, His presence, and experience peace even in the middle of the storm.

God says to us each day, "Be still and know that I am God." It is important for followers of Christ to stop, reset, give thanks and be still and know that God is with you. Amen.