

## **Advent Outside the Box: Be Still**

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

Exodus 14:1-14, Psalm 46

Sunday, December 2

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

“I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting...  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”

These words by T.S. Eliot seem to me to be the perfect way for us to begin the season of Advent, the time when we wait for the light of Christ to break into our world and into our lives. You see, I wonder if most years, we find ourselves waiting for what we think we already know is going to happen. I wonder if we spend our time so sure of what we’re hoping for, like a child on Christmas Eve, anxiously awaiting all the presents from their Christmas list that they hope will be under the tree the next morning.

But it’s something entirely different to wait without hope, as Eliot says, for our hope would be hope for the wrong thing. Or to wait without love even, for our love would be love of the wrong thing.

And yet, I don’t think Eliot is asking us to throw hope and love out the window. Instead, perhaps what Eliot is calling us toward is not to have our hearts set and our minds made up already about what we are hoping for. He is calling our limited imaginations to open themselves up to something so much bigger, something so much more outside the box than what we can possibly imagine or hope for on our own.

And all of this begins, he says, with being still. “I said to my soul, be still, and wait.”

In our text for today in Exodus 14, the Israelites are in the middle of the wilderness having just escaped slavery in the land of Egypt, and yet they are instructed to “be still.” Interestingly enough, they find themselves in a waiting space not unlike the season of Advent. They have finally left Pharaoh and his rule over them in Egypt, but now they are wandering through the wilderness, waiting on God to show up. But when Pharaoh looks out and sees them wandering aimlessly, he decides that he never should have let them go, so he commands his army of over 600 chariots to go chasing after the Israelites and to corner them by the Red Sea.

Well, the Israelites begin to panic. They know what they were hoping for in leaving slavery in the land of Egypt, and this is not it. They say to Moses, “Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the wilderness instead? What have you done to us? It would have been better for us to be slaves in Egypt than to die in the wilderness.”

And in one of the most climactic moments in the book of Exodus, with Pharaoh’s armies just moments away from attacking them from one side and the Red Sea keeping them landlocked on the other, Moses turns toward them and says this:

“Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you – and you have only to keep still.”

Before we go any further, we need to unpack what is meant by the words “keep still,” because they do not necessarily mean to “not move a muscle.” Actually, in the very next verse, the Lord tells the Israelites to move forward, so the Hebrew word for “keep still” can’t mean that they are supposed to get comfy for too long. Stillness, here, must have something beyond a purely physical nature.

When I consulted some of Calvary’s Hebrew scholars, Deirdre Fulton and Chad Eggleston, they shared that the word for “stillness” here also implies silence. Eugene Peterson translates it to mean, “Keep your mouths shut!” God is reminding the Israelites that they are not the ones calling the shots here. They need to quiet their voices. I would add that they need to quiet their souls, even. And to trust in God to make a way forward, even when that way seems completely impossible.

I’m guessing that most of us haven’t been stranded in the wilderness with Pharaoh’s army chasing after us - but I know that we in this room have had more than our fair share of impossible moments in the wilderness. Moments when we don’t even know what to hope for any more – because hope seems like such a distant thing. Moments when the diagnosis is not good, and the conversation with the doctor is sobering and real. Moments when we are in the midst of such grief that we can’t imagine a way forward. Moments when the real-life struggles of mental illness keep us locked within ourselves, feeling as if we simply cannot do this any more. Moments when family life and relationships and marriage are hard and messy, and the pain is real. Moments when we have no clue how we got to this point, and no idea where to go from here or how in the world we will ever get there.

And in these moments, to be still probably seems like the very last thing we would ever want to do. Because stillness doesn’t let us escape. Stillness doesn’t let us numb our pain with busyness or distractions or excess or noise. Stillness doesn’t let us sweep things under the rug and move along. Stillness doesn’t let us just keep going along and pretend like everything is okay.

No, stillness asks us to be where we are for a moment. To be quiet and listen – even when we’re scared of what we might hear. To be present to whatever it is that we are experiencing. To sit for a moment in that emotion or experience, even when that’s the last thing we want to do. For many of us, to quiet our souls and to be still is a very scary, very vulnerable thing.

And yet, I can’t help but wonder if fully trusting in God looks like being brave enough to be still, even and perhaps especially in those vulnerable moments when our way forward is simply not clear.

There’s a great story about some westerners who hired a few bushmen guides to lead them in their travels through the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa. Not long into their trip, the guides realized that they weren’t used to moving at the fast pace that the westerners were expecting them to go. Suddenly, without any warning, the guides stopped and insisted that they could not go any further. The westerners were confused and kept asking why they couldn’t keep going, but no amount of persuasion could convince them otherwise. Finally, the bushmen shared the reason for this pause. They said, “We had been moving so fast that we had to stop awhile and wait for our souls to catch up.”

Perhaps, like the bushmen guides, that’s why we so need stillness this Advent season. So much has been happening and we have been moving so fast that our souls need to catch up. And yet, the reality is that most years, I spent the Advent season much like the western travelers pushing their way through the African desert. Sometimes it feels as if I don’t even let my soul to come up for air until Christmas Eve.

But on Christmas Eve night, something almost magical happens for me. Near the end of what has become my favorite worship service of the year here at Calvary, we begin to pass candlelight from the Christ candle

around the sanctuary, and a warm and peaceful glow fills the room. And it's in this moment that my soul finally stops. A stillness settles within me unlike anything I experience in any other space or at any other time of year.

And while it is a beautiful moment and I look forward to it, I yearn for it even, year after year – I wonder what might happen if we practiced moments of Christmas Eve stillness all throughout the Advent season? What if, instead of hustling and bustling our way through December, we stopped for a moment and made space for our souls to catch up? What would it really look like for you and for me to say to our souls, be still, this Advent season?

As Benedictine Monk John Main has said, it is in “being wholly still [that] we become wholly open.” Perhaps it's only when we are truly still that our souls are truly open to God. I wonder if that's why the Lord commanded the Israelites to be still in the wilderness. God knows that their souls need to catch up for a moment so that they won't miss out on what God is going to do next.

Moments later, in verse 19, the angel of the Lord who had been traveling in front of the Israelite army, withdraws and moves behind them. Likewise, the pillar of cloud that had been in front of them goes instead behind them, positioning itself between Pharaoh's armies and the Israelite people. Verse 20 says, “Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other, so neither went near the other all night long.”

God's glowing presence blocks the threat of Pharaoh's army, protecting the Israelites and bringing light in the midst of their wilderness darkness. Their job is to keep still. Perhaps it's out of that stillness that they are ready when God says to take that next brave step forward. God parts the waters of the Red Sea so that the Israelites can walk through on dry ground. They cross through to the other side, and there is great celebration about something they never could have hoped for or imagined on their own. There is singing. And there is even dancing.

“I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting...  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”

Friends, whatever wilderness you are experiencing this Advent season – remember these words that Moses spoke to the Israelites: “The Lord will fight for you –you have only to keep still.”

And so, in your waiting, may you find hope you could not have imagined otherwise.  
In your darkness, may there be glimmers of light, even where you least expect it.  
And in your moments of stillness, may there be dancing this Advent season.