**First United Methodist Church**

**618 Eighth Street**

**Columbus, Indiana 47201**

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“A Summer Hike: Calming”

Text: Psalm 46

Today we continue our sermon series on a summer hike. As I stated last week, while the theme is about going for a hike, it doesn’t mean a long trek. This might be a walk in the park, a scenic hike in a state park or just a trip around the block. It isn’t often that I get to quote the philosopher Friedrick Nietzsche, but he was known to be an avid walker. And he once said, “All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking.” Sometimes what we need is the ability to get up from where we are and see the world around us from a new perspective. When I get stuck while writing the sermon, it is not uncommon for me to get up and go for a walk in the neighborhood. Sometimes that is enough to clear my mind or reset my thoughts or to alight upon a new idea that helps me continue. So, today we continue this sermon series of a summer hike to calm our minds, clear our senses and see how the Holy Spirit might bring new insights. Let us begin with a prayer:

**Merciful God, who guided the people through the wilderness into the promised land, we are all on our own journeys today. We don’t know where we are going. We can’t see the destination. We aren’t even sure we know what we are looking for. Be our guide. Lead us with your love. Give us strength for those difficult times and deliver us safely to the places that bring hope and peace and joy to us and to all those around us. Amen.**

There is a story about three men who were hiking when they came upon an unexpected obstacle. Due to heavy rains, the little stream that they were to cross was a tremendous river. They could see the path continuing on the opposite side, but worried about crossing safely. Unsure what to do, one of the men knelt on the banks of the water and began to pray. He asked for strength to cross the river. Miraculously, when he stood he found that his muscles had grown and after fighting the current for 30 minutes he was able to cross safely.

Inspired by this first man, the second one knelt and prayed. He prayed for both the strength and the tools to cross the river. His prayer was answered with newly gained strength and a rowboat which he used to successfully cross the river in only 20 minutes.

The third man decided to follow their example. He knelt and prayed for the intelligence to find the best way to cross. He was promptly turned into a woman, found a bridge a few yards downstream and walked across safely in two minutes.

My apologies to the men of the congregation, but I found that too funny not to share. It is also a good lead in to where I wanted to begin our sermon this morning. It is about our weariness. It is about our fears. I want to start by just naming the things that I am experiencing and the things many of you have expressed. These are difficult times.

There are personal concerns that we always carry with us. Some of you are facing medical challenges. You are worried about your health or the health of a loved one. Some of you are carrying the responsibilities of caring for a loved one. Some of you are watching someone you love make decisions that you worry are not in their best interest. Some of you are weighted down with grief and loss. And there are many other unnamed struggles that are present here among us today. Oftentimes these burdens are unseen by those around us. We bear the burdens with love and kindness continuing to carry out all the other tasks our day presents.

But I have also heard many of you express the difficulty of world issues and the fears and concerns that accompany these things. July is much too early in the season to be experiencing hurricanes. Wildfires have becoming commonplace. I found a website dedicated to tracking current wildfires in the United States and found that as of July 11th there are 74 large active fires over 13 different states covering almost 700,000 acres of land.

Last month the Center for Disease Control declared firearm deaths to be a public health crisis. Since 2020 guns account for the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 19, exceeding car accidents, cancer, and heart disease.

And the deep divisions in our nation have us worried. I will only speak for myself on this, but I find myself watching the evening news and feeling discouraged. And yet, to not watch the news and read about current events would leave me uninformed and unable to know how to address the issues we face.

We are weary. We are worried. We are discouraged. The state of affairs in our world, compounded by the personal issues we face leave us worn out. And that is what makes today’s recommendation feel counter-intuitive. When we are weary and worried, sometimes what we need is to move. With all that negativity washing over us, the temptation is to just stop. Instead of giving in to that temptation, perhaps one solution might be found by moving.

Studies have shown that going for a walk, nothing strenuous, just a gentle pace, has great benefits for our mind, body, and soul. A good walk can reduce the risk of heart disease, lower one’s blood pressure, reduce stress and improve sleep. Contrast those benefits with what stress and conflict brings to our lives. A gentle walk or hike can restore balance to our lives.

On top of that, research from Stanford University shows that a walk can boost your creativity and enhance your problem-solving skills. I have read that Tchaikovsky took a walk every morning before he sat down to work on his musical compositions. Einstein walked the beach when he was perplexed with a difficult problem. To go for a walk or a hike is not running away from the problems we face, it is a way to find insight and creativity that enables us to keep going.

That is why I wanted to share with you this morning those familiar and beautiful words from Psalm 46. They address both the turmoil in the world, but also the discovery of hope and peace amid those difficult times.

The psalm begins with the reassurance that God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of need. It is important to hold onto that touchstone. Whatever we face today is not the first time we have faced something difficult. And unfortunately, it will not be the last. But the psalm begins by reminding us that no matter what we have faced or what will come next, God is there to offer help and hope. We are not alone in the things we face, either in our personal lives or in our society. That is to say that God cares about what we are facing.

Having begun with God’s abiding presence, the psalmist then names some of the issues facing the people. Though they are figurative examples they sound rather familiar. The nations are in an uproar. The kingdoms totter. The earth is changing, and it feels like the mountains are shaking. We hear those words from the psalmist, and we offer a nod of agreement. Yes, that is what we see all around us. It feels like the world is in an uproar. The psalmist has named the anxieties that we experience in the modern day.

So what does the psalmist recommend we do about it? There are some clear recommendations. The psalmist advises that we should circulate petitions. We should march in the streets. We should post things on social media. We should fight the powers. You already know that this is not what the psalmist says, even though these might be exactly what the circumstances call for.

No, the psalmist advises us to listen for that still, small voice that advises us to “be still and know God.” Start there. Begin with a quiet walk. Find a place to settle down. Be still amid the struggles. Because in those quiet places, we are renewed by God’s presence, and we find clarity for how to move forward. After that quiet reflection we find the insight for how to proceed.

I think that is where many of our churches get stuck. Even though we are not always comfortable with it, we will take the time to be still and listen for God’s voice. But then we are reticent to move forward in ways that bring about the change that is needed.

The mystic writer Evelyn Underhill understood the importance of such stillness. She wrote, “Try to arrange things so that you can have a reasonable bit of quiet every day and do not…think it selfish…. You are obeying God’s call and giving [God] the opportunity to teach you about what [God] wants you to know, and so make you more useful to [God] and other souls.” It is in those quiet moments that we find fresh possibilities to address the struggles we are facing. We can get so caught up in the struggle that we fail to see any escape. The road looks hopeless. The ability to go for a walk, to find a moment of peace can help us see what was always there, but which we had not noticed before.

In his wonderful novel, “Remembering” Wendell Berry tells about Andy Catlett. Andy is a farmer and a journalist who lost his right hand in a corn-picking machine. He falls into a time of depression, angry that he had made such a simple mistake and upset for all that it cost him.

Catlett was scheduled to speak at a conference in San Francisco about family farming. At first he considers not attending. But he is a man of his word and reluctantly boards the airplane and makes the trip.

Because of the time difference from his home in Kentucky, he awakens before sunrise. He cannot fall back asleep. He decides to go for a walk. With no particular destination in mind, he just walks the streets of San Francisco before dawn. And he reflects upon what he sees and hears in that quiet walk.

He hears the sounds of a baby crying from an apartment window. He sees the folks who are sleeping on the streets. He sees other morning people exercising in the park. He watches as the streetlights go off at the wakening day. And in the big city, he hears the sounds of birds singing, announcing the new possibilities that await on this fresh day.

As he is walking and experiencing these moments, the author repeats the same phrase throughout the story, “He reminded himself of himself.” It is an odd, but beautiful phrase. “He reminded himself of himself.” And what I took from those words is that he found what he had been missing in his life. He came back to being himself. In that quiet walk before the sun had risen, his spirit was renewed.

He returned home a different man. And in telling that story to his family he said, “I can’t say I’ve always lived by what I learned that day---I wish I had---but I’ll never forget that it was there all the time.” When pressed to explain what he found that had been there all along he said, “Redemption. A little flowing stream.”

It is redemption. A fresh start. A new beginning. It didn’t heal his hand, but it brought a deeper healing to his soul. He saw the world awakening around him and experienced that fresh awakening within himself. He was redeemed, reminded of himself and who he was.

We have brought a lot of burdens in this room today. I don’t presume to have the ability to take away those burdens. But what I can offer this morning is an invitation. It is the same invitation that the psalmist offered so long ago. Amid the turmoil we face, amid the fears that abound around us, amid the divisions we are facing, I invite you to come away to a quiet place. Take a little walk, not to escape, but to find a moment of peace that will nourish your spirit and perhaps open that doorway to new possibilities. This is the way that brings healing and redemption to our weary lives and enables us to find the strength and hope for the world around us.