

“Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There”

Joseph J. Clifford

Myers Park Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

- ¹ *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;*
- ³ *though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*
- ⁴ *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.*
- ⁵ *God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.*
- ⁶ *The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.*
- ⁷ *The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*
- ⁸ *Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.*
- ⁹ *He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.*
- ¹⁰ *“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”*
- ¹¹ *The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Psalm 46)*

Early in my ministry, I came across the music of a wonderful folk singer, Billy Jonas. My favorite song of his is called “God is In.” Its lyrics are playful and profound, exploring the presence of God in our world and within each of us. Some of the playful lines include “God is in your new tattoo, in your scars and birthmarks too. God is in your brand new nose and your control top pantyhose. God is in the latest fad, except for bungee jumping, that’s dangerous and bad. God is in *Vogue* and *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*, ‘cause God is in.”¹

My favorite verse is the last in the song: “God is incredulous at all the stuff we do to us. God is inspired by those who fly and those who try. God is insatiable, so sing and dance way past full. God is in you and me. Someday God will help us see God is in love with love, so live in love and that’s enough.”²

There's a verse about religion in the song as well. I'm pretty sure it would be considered heresy by the Westminster Confession, but I kind of like it. It goes "God is in the Christian house, bread and wine, holy cross. God is in the Jewish home, shalom havarim shalom. God is in the Muslim, allah w'akhbar a sallam. God is in the Hindu way, jabagwan, namaste. God is in the atheist saying 'Yeah, I don't exist.' God is in the Buddhist chair saying 'Don't just do something, sit there.'"³

That's where I got the title for today's sermon. Don't just do something, sit there. This sounds so counterintuitive right now in our world. Our world is filled with a sense of urgency, demanding we do something now about a whole host of problems. Heat waves and massive wildfires impacting multiple continents demand we do something. Last Sunday night, there was another mass shooting by a young white man in Greenwood, Indiana, outside of Indianapolis, claiming the lives of three more victims: Pedro Pineda, Rosa Mirian Rivera de Pineda, and Victor Gomez. There would have been many more if another young white man hadn't killed the shooter with his own gun. We've got to do something, don't we? This year, all sides of the political spectrum fuel the flames of fear of the other, touting the latest threat posed by their opposition and demanding we do something to stop them, whoever they are in respect to us. Don't just sit there, do something!

I'll confess I feel this sense of urgency when it comes to the state of our society and our world. And I'll also confess a sense of helplessness in the face of all this. I can preach about actions I believe should be taken, I can even quote scripture to justify those actions, but I wonder if it does any good. I'm not sure preaching changes hearts and minds these days. People who agree might applaud or offer an "Amen!" even if it's a Presbyterian amen, under their breath. People who don't agree will just get frustrated and find another church that's saying things they agree with, and they'll applaud for that preacher. In the end, does anything actually change? It can start to feel like a Facebook post that just becomes fodder for the algorithms feeding the fury tearing our society apart. In the end, nothing actually happens to meaningfully address the very real challenges we face.

Maybe we could sign a petition or hold a rally or figure out some other way to bring everyone who agrees with us together to show how serious we really are about the problem. There's been a lot of that in recent years. I've even participated in some of it, but it doesn't seem much progress is being made. We can't just sit here; we've got to do something, don't we?

Yet we come to church, and the title of today's sermon is "Don't just do something, sit there!" What's that about? Do we support the status quo? How can we say such a thing amid the urgency of now? Where do we get such an idea from? Is Joe now preaching from folk songs instead of scripture?

Well, actually the idea came from a song much older than Billy Jonas's "God is In." It came from a song written some 2,700 years ago, a song we know as Psalm 46.

Amid a world of mountains trembling and waters foaming and nations in an uproar and kingdoms tottering, what is the word of the Lord? “Be still, and know that I am God.” Scholars suggest Psalm 46 was written amid the time when Jerusalem faced an Assyrian siege toward the end of the 8th century BC, a story related in 2 Kings 19, a siege God ultimately delivered them from. It was certainly a time when nations were roaring. The kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians, and the kingdom of Judah was tottering on the edge of oblivion. Imagine what it felt like to be living in Jerusalem during those days—probably something like it feels to live in eastern Ukraine right now. Talk about helpless! It had to be an incredibly anxious time. Yet the word of the Lord quoted in Psalm 46 is what? “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Family Systems Theory speaks of “chronic anxiety” in human systems. In his book *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Edwin Friedman describes five characteristics of chronically anxious systems. The first is *reactivity*, defined by knee-jerk reactions that “seem to bypass the cerebral cortex and perpetuate a super-charged emotional atmosphere.” Do we know anything about that these days? The second symptom of chronic anxiety is *herding*, when “forces of togetherness triumph over the forces of individuality and move everyone to adapt to the least mature members.” Can we check that box? The third symptom is *blame displacement*, defined by a “focus on forces that have victimized rather than taken responsibility for one’s own being and destiny.” Heard any of that lately? The fourth symptom is a *quick-fix mentality* that seeks relief of symptoms rather than fundamental change. Don’t just sit there, do something! Finally, chronically anxious systems lack good leadership, “a failure of nerve,” as Friedman puts it, “that both stems from and contributes to reactivity, herding, blame displacement, and a quick fix mentality.” Chronic anxiety defines our culture. It’s everywhere in our world. It also has a way of showing up in the Bible, which tells me chronic anxiety is not a product of the 21st century, but rather part of the human condition.

This chronic anxiety has a way of making everything urgent, feeding the anxiety of the moment. This is not to say that the challenges we face are not urgent. As Martin Luther King said at the March on Washington in 1963, amid the urgent challenges of his day, “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there ‘is’ such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.” Indeed, there is an urgency to the challenges we face. However, perhaps the best thing we can do is not let the bubbling anxiety drive our response to these problems. Sometimes, just doing something to alleviate our anxiety exacerbates the real problems causing that anxiety. As Dr. Bayo AKOmolafe of The Emergence Network puts it, “The times are urgent; let us slow down.”⁴

Perhaps this is what Psalm 46 is trying to teach us. Amid the urgency of times when earth is changing and mountains are shaking in the heart of the sea and waters

are roaring and foaming and creation is trembling with tumult and nations roar and kingdoms totter, the psalmists calls us to gather at the river, the river running through the middle of it all, the river whose streams make glad the city of God. The Psalmist reminds us, "God is in the midst of the city," God is in the midst of this mess of a world we've made, and God will help us when the morning dawns. God works to make wars cease, breaks the bow, shatters the spear, and uses shields as kindling to cook supper. God utters God's voice, and the frozen hearts of the world melt.

Beloved, amid the urgency of these days, hear the word of the Lord: "Be still, and know that I am God." Put another way, "the times are urgent, so let us slow down." Let not the anxiety of the moment push us into thoughtless action or meaningless action that will not deal with the heart of the challenges we face. Let not our chronic anxiety reinforce the power structures that made the mess in the first place. Let not our chronic anxiety about urgent problems created over centuries lead us to believe such challenges can be fixed in one election cycle. Let not our chronic anxiety simplify complex challenges into absolutist thinking that produces either/or choices we believe will bring us a quick fix. That's simply not reality. Let not the chronic anxiety of the moment make everything fiercely urgent, leaving us burnt out, depressed, and exhausted, with no energy for the vigorous and positive action that really is needed to respond to the fierce urgency of now.⁵

Instead, let us remember, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear." Fear is a powerful emotion, often weaponized to serve dubious intentions, but, it's an obstacle to thoughtful responses to the very real problems of our day. If fear defines our response to the fierce urgency of now, it will not be a faithful response.

What else are we called to do? "Be still." In the midst of the mayhem, amid the buzz of the world and all its fear mongering and kingdom tottering and urgent anxiety, be still. "Be still, and know that I am God," says the Lord. What did our grandmothers tell us to do when we found ourselves angry or overwhelmed by something or someone? Take a deep breath and count to 10. It takes the human brain about 10 seconds to absorb adrenaline. Once that adrenaline is absorbed, we are capable of constructive thought. Our cerebral cortex can start firing to help us process what's going on. Amid all the tragedies and injustices that leave our collective adrenaline factory known as the media, pumping us full of anxiety, what would it mean for us to take a collective breath and count to ten so that we could actually think? "Don't just do something; sit there."

Finally, the Psalmist reminds us of God's word, "Know that I am God." Know that God is God; we are not. And God is with us. And God is our refuge and our strength. So don't be afraid. God is in the midst of the mess. God is about making wars cease, breaking bows, shattering spears, and making shields obsolete. That's God's vision. How might we be about joining God's response to the fierce urgency of now?

Notes

1 Billy Jonas, "God Is In," on *Life So Far*, 2000.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Bayo AKOmolafe, The Emergence Network, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XH WKiOk1 l>.

5 This paragraph was informed by one of the aspects of White Supremacy Culture that is "urgency."
See URGENCY – WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE.