

Stillness in the Midst
(Christ the King Sunday)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

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 the city; it shall not be moved;

God will help it when the morning dawns.

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;

God's voice resounds, the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations God has brought on the earth.

God makes wars cease to the end of the earth;

God breaks the bow and shatters the spear;

God burns the shields 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.

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Stillness in the Midst

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 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.

Be still, and know that I am God.

These two images from Psalm 46 sit only seven verses apart. Catastrophe in one breath. A gentle invitation in the next. Seven verses between mountains crumbling into the sea and "be still and know." Even fewer between nations in an uproar and kingdoms tottering—and that quiet, famous call to stillness.

We're familiar with "Be still and know that I am God" as the song we sing in worship at the beginning of our Time with Children—a reassuring, melodic way of grounding ourselves. But the psalm doesn't begin with grounding or stillness. The psalm begins with earthquake and flood, with the kind of chaos that makes stillness feel impossible. It doesn't ease us gently toward peace—it thrusts us into catastrophe and then insists that God is present right there, in the midst of it all. It proclaims that chaos will not have the last word. And it says this even as the ground gives way and the waters roar, as nations revolt and kingdoms totter. The phrase "be still and know" isn't actually a gentle invitation. It's a command. A command to let go—to release our illusions of control—to recognize that the world may be falling apart, but God is still present in the midst of it.

The psalm's command to be still even as the world shakes prepares us for Christ the King Sunday, which presents a similar challenge: to call Jesus "King" not in a moment of triumph, but as he hangs on a cross. Much like Psalm 46, Christ the King Sunday holds together contradictions without resolution. It places us inside the same kind of holy tension the psalmist names: faith in God even when the world is falling apart; Christ as King even as he is being crucified.

I'll admit that in years past, Christ the King Sunday has often felt outdated or out of step—kingship seemed to be something from another age, ceremonial. But this year feels different. The 'No Kings' protests erupting across our nation makes it clear that kingship isn't a relic but a live question about concentrated power: how it's held, how it's abused, how one person's will can reshape millions of lives.

Which makes Christ the King Sunday incredibly relevant. In a moment when concentrated power is threatening, Christ the King Sunday lifts up a king whose reign is established through surrender, whose authority comes not from taking but from giving, whose throne is a cross, and whose coronation is a crucifixion.

That is profoundly good news. But it is not without its challenge. Because this kind of kingship requires us to unlearn what we think power is for—to notice the difference between the power we distrust, which dominates, the power we often desire, which protects and fixes, and the power Jesus reveals, which neither dominates nor protects and fixes but instead gives itself away in love.

Nowhere is that distinction clearer than in the scene Luke gives us at the foot of the cross.

You might expect a Christ the King Sunday text to be triumphant—something from Ephesians about Christ seated "far above all rulers and authorities," or from Isaiah about the child called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace." But instead, the lectionary gives us a scene from Christ's crucifixion. A scene of absolute humiliation.

And yet, this is the very place where Luke insists that Christ's kingship becomes visible. Not in splendor or triumph. Not in a resurrection narrative or soaring rhetoric. But here—amid vulnerability and suffering, in a moment that looks like utter defeat. This is where the Gospel declares Christ's kingship.

And Luke makes clear exactly what kind of King Jesus is in the details he chooses to highlight. Hanging between two criminals, Jesus is flanked not by attendants but by soldiers whose job is to make crucifixion as public and humiliating as possible. The leaders sneer. The soldiers mock. One of the criminals taunts him.

Every voice echoes the same assumption: power means control. Power means avoiding vulnerability. Power means proving yourself by force. "If you are a king," they say, "then save yourself."

But Jesus reveals what power actually is when he refuses to let violence determine his response, when he refuses to retaliate, when he refuses to abandon those who suffer with him. And in those refusals, something holy—something utterly contrary to the world's expectations—comes into view, and a criminal is the only one who sees it.

The theologians of the time saw a heretic. The soldiers saw a victim. The crowd saw a failure. But one of the criminals—a man who knew exactly what 'power over' felt like—looked at a man who refused to curse his killers, who was dying out of love, and recognized true power for the first time. While others mock, a criminal recognized kingship unfolding—not through domination but through steadfast love; not through force but through forgiveness.

That insight—that glimpse of God in the midst of upheaval—is exactly what Psalm 46 insists is possible. Walter Brueggemann called Psalm 46 a psalm of disorientation because it tells the truth about chaos rather than glossing over it. "Though the earth should change," "though the mountains shake," "though the nations are in uproar". The psalmist describes a world in turmoil: political upheaval, natural disaster, instability at every level. And yet, this same psalm makes the bold, defiant claim that "God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved."

Not because the city is stable. But because God is there.

Psalm 46 refuses the shallow optimism that pretends everything is fine. It names the chaos fully—and then declares that God is present even there. Brueggemann calls this "a trust that has no right to exist," and that is exactly what the psalm offers.

Because into that shaking, that roaring, that trembling, God speaks:

"Be still, and know that I am God."

Not "be still because the chaos is over."

Not "be still because everything is fixed."

Not “be still because the mountains have stopped shaking.”

Be still in spite of that.
Be still in the midst of it.
Be still because I am God, and nothing else is.

The command to ‘be still’ is not resignation; it’s not an acceptance of things as they are.
It is a call to resistance.
Resistance against despair.
Resistance against fear.
Resistance against allowing cruelty or hate to shape how we live.

Stillness, in Psalm 46, is not the absence of struggle. It is the groundedness that comes from knowing that God is in the midst of the city—even when the waters roar.

And when we look at the cross, we see Psalm 46 made flesh.

At the foot of the cross, the soldiers roar like the waters; the leaders shake with rage like the mountains. The whole world seems to be melting into chaos. But just as God is in the midst of the city, so Jesus is in the center of the crucifixion providing a refuge that cannot be shaken.

Even as Jesus’ body is broken, his love remains immovable. Jesus becomes the ‘river whose streams make glad’—pouring out forgiveness in a place of execution, offering paradise to a dying man when everyone else offered only hate.

Jesus is the stillness in the center of the storm.

God’s kingship is revealed not in power that conquers suffering, but in love that enters it, bears it, and transforms it. The crucified King is not a contradiction; he is the clearest picture of who God is.

And if Christ’s kingship is most clearly revealed in vulnerability, then it makes sense that we celebrate Christ the King Sunday right before we enter into Advent.

Because recognizing Jesus’s kingship even as he is being crucified prepares us to recognize God’s power in a vulnerable child. The cross prepares us for the manger.

Both of them reveal the same startling truth: that God’s power doesn't look like force. It looks like love. It looks like vulnerability. And it takes shape in the most unexpected places.

And that truth meets us right where we live. Because we know what it feels like when the “nations roar.” We know the unease of public life that feels fractured, polarized, uncertain. We know the exhaustion, the anxiety, the fear of what might come next. And Psalm 46 does not ask us to minimize any of that. Instead, it asks us to anchor ourselves in something deeper—to recognize God’s presence in those very places: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

Not an eventual help.
Not a theoretical help.
A present help.

To live in this tension between what shakes us and the God who anchors us requires that we cultivate stillness—not as escape, but as clarity. Not as passivity, but as trust. It asks us to cultivate stillness that remembers whose we are before deciding how to act, a stillness that lets compassion, not fear, shape our responses. In a world addicted to reaction, this kind of stillness is an act of resistance.

So we turn again to the psalmist’s words—words spoken into a world that was shaking. Words spoken into fear and uncertainty. Words spoken into disorientation:

“Be still, and know that I am God.”

Be still—not because the world is calm,
but because God is God.

Be still—not because the mountains stop shaking,
but because God is in the midst of the city.

Be still—not because everything makes sense,
but because Christ the King reveals a power that does not bow to fear.

Be still,
and step into Advent with courage,
with hope,
and with open eyes—
ready to see God in every vulnerable place where love refuses to be cowed by hate.

Amen.