

Sunday, September 19, 2021  
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON  
**Be Still**, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor  
Based on Psalm 46.10a

I have a question. A personal one. How is it with your soul today? How is the incorporeal, the ethereal essence of you today? The immaterial and immortal part of you?

I am not asking about your brain. Let me just venture a guess there. I am guessing your brain is frazzled, overstimulated, frenetic, and twitchy ...full of chatter and worry.

I am not asking about your body, your corporeal self ... or its wear and tear, its dings and dents.

These matter. Your brain and body matter. They are much of you, but not all of you. Our brains and our bodies are much of what we love about each other – the quirky humor, the wry grin – but not all of what we love of each other.

We are in church and, by the way it's my job, so I'm asking today about your soul.

How is it with your soul today? How is the incorporeal essence of you? The part of you sparked with divinity...the part that will endure through eternity ...the crux of you that survives when the earthly tent of your body has, as they say, given up the ghost?

The idea of a soul is ancient and persistent, shared by many faiths.

Here is what our sacred texts have to say about your soul:

- that God breathed into it the breath of life, making you a human being (Gen. 2.7); making you just a little lower than the angels.
- that your soul, like your body, can be defeated by the enemy. (Matt 10.23)
- that if you walk where the way is good, in the ancient paths, you will find rest for your soul (Jer. 6.16)
- that your soul can find rest in God. (Ps 62.1)

What interests me today is how composers and songwriters, address the soul. When the going gets rough, the hills gets steep, we are encouraged to do what the psalmist does in Psalm 42. Give your soul a good talking to. Like this:

*“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, who is my salvation and my God.”*

Or this: *“Arise, my soul, and sing God’s praises!” (Psalm 108.2)*

Or, as in Psalm 103: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is in within me bless God’s holy name. Bless the Lord, o my soul, and forget not all God’s benefits.” Because we do forget. In the midst of our ordeals we do forget the mercies and graces, the benefits of God. The psalmist sends a reminder of these.

It is not only the psalmist, but also other hymn writers who address the soul:

*Awake, my soul, stretch every nerve, and press with vigor on;  
A heavenly race demands your zeal, and an immortal crown.*

Or this:

*When peace like a river, upholds me each day, When sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot, you have taught me to say: It is well, it is well with my soul.*

In the mid 1700’s, a German Lutheran woman, Katharina von Shlegel penned words to a song in this same vein; meant to encourage the discouraged, to rally the faint hearted, to revive the flagging spirit, to comfort the sorrowful. She based the song on Psalm 46.10.

*Be still, my soul; for God is on your side; Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;  
Leave to your God to order and provide; In every change God faithful will remain.  
Be still, my soul; your best, eternal Friend Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

Von Shlegel’s words were eventually paired with *Finlandia* by Finnish composer Jean Sibelius. The tune is both soothing and solemn, surging and falling in gentle waves. The melody comes in fragments separated by pauses, giving the singer space to linger in the stillness.

The hymn has become associated with Eric Liddell, the Olympic runner featured in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. After the Olympics, Eric became a missionary in China. He was captured and confined to a prison camp, where he died of a brain tumor. Shortly before he died, he taught *Be Still My Soul* to other prisoners. After his death, his fellow prisoners found scraps of paper with its lyrics on his cot. And they said of him, he never flagged, never gave up on God or on hope. They said of him that, to the end, his spirit, his soul was a mighty and indomitable force.

So, back to my question: how is it with your soul today? How is the incorporeal essence of you? That part of you sparked with divinity? The part that will endure through eternity?

The crux of you that survives when the earthly tent of your body will have given up the ghost?

Life is hard. And, hard as it is, the past 18 months...well, they’ve been hellish. A

wearying, terrifying, isolating, sorrowful uphill slog. The pandemic. A national season of racial reckoning. Climate catastrophes. It's been brutal

So hard has it been, that we (as a church) and many of you (as individuals and families) lost loved ones along the way. May they rest in God's transcendent love.

I am guessing there is a broken or breaking spirit in every pew in this sanctuary today; a broken or breaking spirit in every home where folks are worshipping with us remotely.

Yet, our Christian faith is not without resources for we of broken or breaking spirits. *Be Still My Soul* is one such resource.

Singing together is another. From the beginning of Christianity, singing together has been a means of encouragement: a way to boost spirits and summon courage. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul urges us to "sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." ([Col. 3:16](#)).

Song is a vessel that speaks directly to the soul.

*Take My Hand, Precious Lord*, was Dr King's favorite hymn. It sustained him when life was bleak and terrifying. Mahalia Jackson would join Dr King at demonstrations to perform the song as an inspiration, as courage, as promise. That song, sung in defiance, sung with outlandish hope – sung in Christian love while he was hated and reviled, and threatened -- literally kept Dr. King going amidst the brutal battles he faced.

On April 4, 1968 the day he would be assassinated, Dr. King's last words were a request for this song; he asked that it be sung at an event that evening.

*Be Still My Soul*, paired with *Finlandia*, is among my favorites. I don't know what yours is. But I know this: right about now is a good time to turn to your favorite song or hymn. The one that gives you courage and revives your flagging spirit. The one that inspires you to train your attentions on God, not on your own pain. Learn that song, if you haven't already. Memorize it. Sing it aloud. Sing it to your soul. Sing it through the nightmares, through the sorrows, and the pain.

Sing to your soul, Christian. It will do you good. I promise. What's more: it will do the world good.

#### CLOSING ANNOUNCEMENTS

Join us at 11am this morning, on the second floor for our Community Hour Forum, where you will have an opportunity to meet, hear from, and get to know, our seminarian, Jessica Young Chang.

Following the Postlude, you are invited to a docented tour of the church. Meet below the pulpit with today's Docent, David Becker.

To exit, you may go out as you came in, or by the doors behind the chancel.

#### BENEDICTION

Now, to the Benediction:

Go now, and go in safety, for you cannot go where God is not. Go in love, for love alone endures. Go with courage, for courage is the gift of God. Go with peace, for peace is the presence of Christ, our friend and brother. And the blessing of Almighty God, Creator Christ and Spirit, be with you and remain with you now and ever.

And let the whole church say, *Amen!*