

Spiritual Redwoods: Protective Bark, Strong Trunk, Holy Refuge and Strength

Spiritual Redwoods September series #3

Psalm 46

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God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1 NRSV

*The Beloved is our refuge and our strength,
a loving Presence in times of trouble.*

*Therefore, we will not fear though
the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the
heart of the sea;
Though the waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble
with its tumult.*

*There is a river whose streams
make glad the Holy City,
the holy habitation of the Most High.*

*The Beloved is in the midst of it,
it shall not be moved;*

*Our loving Creator is an
ever-present help.*

*The nations may be at war,
countries left in ruin,
yet is the Voice of the Almighty heard,
melting hearts of stone.*

*The Beloved is with us,
the infinite Heart of Love.*

*Come, behold the works of the Beloved,
how love does reign even in
humanity's desolation.*

*For the Beloved makes wars to cease,
breaking the barriers of fear;
shattering the greedy and oppressors,
refining hearts of iron.*

"Be still and know that I am Love.

*I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth!"*

*The One who knows all hearts is with us;
The Beloved is our refuge and our strength.*

Psalm 46, *Psalms for Praying* by Nan Merrill

Over the last two weeks we have explored lessons we can learn from redwood trees. We looked at how their seeds are some of the smallest seeds in the world. These tiny seeds grow to be magnificent coast redwood and sequoia trees like the parable Jesus told about the mustard seed. Then we looked at the roots of redwoods trees. They spread out in shallow soil and are intertwined, keeping groves healthy and nourished, reminding us that they and we are interdependent. We are rooted and grounded in God's love.

Today we're going to focus on the bark and trunks of redwood trees.

When you look at a magnificent redwood tree or giant sequoia, you can see the bark looks unique. It is when you touch it you notice how unusual it is. It is soft. You can push on it and it responds. It is porous. It is very different than most tree bark that is hard and solid. Bark protects the tree from weather and anything that would try to destroy the life of the tree. The bark provides protection, refuge, from harm.

The bark on the trunk of redwoods and sequoias is a truly amazing in the ways it protects the tree, provides refuge from threats, and sustains life.

Redwood bark, soft and fibrous, varies in color from red-brown to grayish. On mature sequoia trees it may grow to 2 feet in thickness. On mature coast redwoods about 1 foot thick. The thick bark protects the tree from fire damage. Repeated hot fires can burn through the bark but the tree can survive. Because of the moisture and thickness of the bark, redwoods and sequoias can indeed withstand fire. (1)

Over the past month we in northern CA have endured over 100 fires burning at once. Some spread through forests of redwood trees. Even though we know they can withstand fire, the fires were so hot and so intense that they threatened redwoods all over the state.

One of the most dramatic images from these fires came from Big Basin State Park. Many of us held our breath and prayed that the redwoods could survive there. All the buildings and much of campgrounds were destroyed. When the smoke started to clear, there it was. Fires still burning in the trunk of redwoods but the tree was still standing. In fact it looked like the shape of a heart. This fire went inside a redwood tree, but it did not destroy it. There will be scars but it continues to live and incorporates that fire scar into the tree. Changed but not destroyed. The bark protected the life of the tree. That bark provided refuge and strength in the midst of fire, echoing our psalm from this morning.

Lightning can hit a redwood and scar the tree, but the scars are then incorporated into the tree as it regenerates. All over the eastern Sierras you see where lightning struck giant Sequoias. It is dramatic.

Part of tree's core may rot out. These hollowed-out trees are called "goose pens" because early settlers kept chickens and geese in them. Refuge for life in another way.

As you probably know, these resilient trees often live several hundred years, and in some cases, more than 2,000 years. This makes them one of the oldest tree species in the world. Resistance to fire and disease make this long lifespan possible. The high tannin content is undesirable to insects while the low amounts of resin resist fire.

The bark and trunk can withstand threats, creating strong protection. The scars are visible and incorporated into the tree. We too can live that way. Scars from disasters, hurt does not disappear but are incorporated into life. Each tree is a living story of life and death and life.

Their trunks are amazing. The Redwood trunks reach upward, seeking the light far above the forest canopy, above the misty shroud below. (2)

The dynamic life force of the Redwood is demonstrated in its ability to sprout whole trunks from the side of its main trunk. Although these "reiterated" trunks may originate high above the ground, they grow upright as if they were new trees. Dead foliage often collects at the base of these upper trunks, which becomes soil over the decades and centuries, forming an upper ground, a refuge, a safe place for other trees and shrubs to sprout and grow. (3)

Researchers have found a complete ecosystem of ferns, shrubs and whole trees growing high up in the forest canopy. ...a whole ecosystem lives in the canopy of the Redwood forest, raised up to the light and warmth, high above the cool, damp mists of the forest floor.

When we look at the trunks and redwood bark and know it provides protection and refuge in the midst of actual crises and threats, we remember the writer of Psalm 46 who was offering the same hope and affirmation. Psalm 46 is a strong affirmation of trusting Holy Mystery, Divine Love in the most troublesome situations and threatening crises.

The opening statement (verse 1) as well as the recurring refrain (verses 7 and 11) each serves as reinforcements to God's presence and God's protection. God is in us and with us, even when the world around us seems to be falling apart. In the midst of unpredictable natural disasters that change and destroy the earth, God's people are not to be overwhelmed with fear (verses 2-3). In the midst of political calamity, the voice of God can be heard (verse 6). In the midst of military conflicts, God will bring peace (verse 9).

"Be still and know that I am God!" (verse 10) No human being or empire has ultimate power. The Beloved is our refuge and strength. The Holy One in us and among us.

Our hymn this morning and choral response *God of Grace and God of Glory*, remind us that there is Holy Mystery is both intimate and infinite. The psalm speaks to this – both/and. Not

one or the other. Power and presence. The final words of each verse of the hymn ring true – *Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage for the facing of this hour.* We need courage and wisdom to face this time of so many challenges. The Holy One is near and is a source of strength.

Many have lost jobs or steady income during the pandemic. We are grieving for the 200,000 who have died of Covid 19. We weep for those who lost homes and businesses in the fires. We see the need to work for racial justice and good policing practices while saying the names of those who suffered from excessive force. There are threats to our democracy and election process. We need refuge and strength to face the uncertainty of the future.

Refuge and strength. Not avoiding the realities of disasters and crises, but a sense we are not alone as we face loss and grief and threats. The Holy One in the midst of personal loss and communal loss.

Protection and strength. The bark and trunk of a redwood – glorious, towering, withstanding fires that could destroy. And holding fragile new growth as it sprouts. Holding ferns and trees at the top. The psalm reminds us that like the bark that provides protection in crises and challenges, the holy one offers us refuge and strength over time because we are rooted and grounded in love.

Redwoods teach us that there are stories of facing calamities over time built into their very being. Through the work scientists we now have comprehensive tree ring records for species of redwood trees. Collecting core samples from the trees allows us to count annual growth rings, enabling an accurate estimation of tree ages. Currently record for coast redwoods extends back to 328 AD; for giant sequoia it reaches 474 AD.

Scientists take pencil-thin cross sections from trees to count their growth rings. Growth rings (or tree rings) can vary in width and tell a story of the tree's growth history and what was happening in the forest during a particular year. The science of studying tree ring patterns is called dendrochronology. Scientists can see how events such as droughts, fire and flooding have affected redwoods' growth across history. (4)

Redwoods invoke deep truths. I like the quote of John Steinbeck.

"The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. No one has ever successfully painted or photographed a redwood tree. The feeling they produce is not transferable. From them comes silence and awe.

Silence and awe. Be still. Consider what the redwoods teach us. Maybe what we need to hear comes at the end of the psalm.

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

I want to close with a powerful biblical story about importance of being still in the midst of a crisis and trusting in Holy Presence. I appreciated the insights of one of my favorite preachers, Rev. Kara Root. When the Hebrew people had been slaves in Egypt and God calls Moses to lead them to freedom, there is a dramatic moment. They are fleeing but they are afraid. The Pharaoh's army is on their tails. They think maybe they should not have left. They knew what to expect when they lived in Egypt. It is hard to change and face the wilderness even with the hope of a promised land.

They said to Moses, ... "What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." ¹³But Moses said to the people, '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. ¹⁴The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.' Exodus 14:10-14

And then, against all instinct – both as slaves defined by their labor, and as people filled with terror and adrenaline – they are still. They stand still and watch. And before their eyes a re-creation happens. Hemmed in by light and cloud of darkness, there is evening and there is morning, a new day, and this God who formed the earth moves again and the waters are separated, and dry land appears. And they cross. God makes a way where there was no way. And they are brought from death to life. God destroys all that would destroy them.

You are MINE. God says decisively. *Be still and I will show you this is so.*

When we pass through the waters to the other side—when, in a moment of terrible need and difficult stillness, we are aware of God's deep love and presence --we are redefined as people held by God no matter what. We are led into something new and also returning to our identity, ancient and true: we belong to this God. We belong to each other. (5)

One side of the Red Sea is fear and the limited life. The other side of the Red Sea is life-giving. Learning to live as the people who rest in God's care, who trust in God, never ends. So when we are ejected from our familiar patterns into the unknown, when it feels like persistent and powerful fear will undoubtedly capture and destroy us, *be still*. Holy One, Holy Mystery will make a way make a way where there is no way. The terrors we face today will not prevail. Let's remember the lessons from the redwoods. We can take the lessons and scars of this challenging time into the future and know that The Beloved in our refuge and strength. Take time to be still. Amen.

1) [Sunny Fortuna redwood facts.](#)

2) and 3) <http://www.flowersociety.org/>.

4) <https://www.savetheredwoods.org/>

5 <https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2020/09/be-still-and-ill-show-you.html>