

## *The Soul's Roominess*

Text: Psalm 46

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A curious word . . . a few places to connect deeper . . . and some wondering about the soul's roominess. These are the gifts that I bring to you this morning.

**Let's start with that word I've called curious.** It's a biblical word; one that you may have come across in your own devotional time or heard now and again as a passage is read. But, I'll bet that for most of us, it's one that we have skimmed over unaware or slid past unknowing.

The word is *selah* (*say-la*). (Say it with me: *selah*.) It shows up seventy-one times in the book of Psalms, frequent enough to warrant at least passing attention. It also makes a debut three times in the book of Habakkuk.

Over the years there have been a variety of interpretations as to its meaning. Probably most often and accurate is that it's an instruction of the musical variety. Remember, almost all of the Psalms were once sung, and as such, many have come to believe that *selah* refers to taking a pause or a moment in the midst of a melody.

I asked a rabbinic friend of mine about this and he took it a good bit deeper. "Pause and silence in music are a given," he said, "after all, melody is constructed not only by the sound of the notes but the spaces between them."

"I interpret *selah* to be more than a musical notation," (he was pleased to be teaching me.) "I see it as a spiritual instruction just as much. It's an invitation to take an intentional breath. Everything in life changes when we do that, not only music – heart rate, oxygen to the body, blood pressure, the synapses in our brains, the synchronicity of complex biological mysteries, the rhythm of our lungs. When we tend to our breathing our bodies slow down sufficiently enough to let our minds and hearts rest a little more. And when that happens, when the inner chatter of our mind slows down, the roominess in our soul can take us to deeper places."

My friend seemed suddenly startled, even embarrassed as so he softly apologized, "My Rabbinic instinct expects that I instruct as often as I can about Hebrew scripture. I hope I didn't overstep." I just smiled and said, "*selah*." We took a breath together.

**But let's step deeper with this.** Because the Psalms are so rich and full with the whole spectrum of life – so of course taking a breath makes good spiritual sense. And honestly, there is nothing in life nothing - not one thing - from which the Psalms shy away.

So, armed with my new understanding and appreciation of this still-curious word, I went back and traced those seventy-one occurrences. (Well, half of them anyway!)

I quickly found selah is an equal-opportunity instructor. She arrives across the breadth of life - in anguish or lament or loneliness - as in "My God, my God, why have you left me alone?"; and just as much in delight or praise or love - as in "I am fearfully and wonderfully made!" Selah shows up at both extremes.

I found her in moments of fearful despair among dissonant peoples. "The nations have sunk into the pit that they have made. Put them in fear. Let them know that they are only human." Selah.

I found her when the shepherd's care is sorely needed, and green pastures and still waters seem to be just what's needed most. Ironically, many people experience the presence of God as absence – that is, they know that something is missing in the valley of the shadow. That takes a breath of stillness. An expectant pause. And a yearning for life to overflow with goodness and mercy. Selah.

Or in the words that Dave read for us. "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Be still and know that I am God." In that single Psalm you will find an invitation to take a breath, selah, three times - the thoughts are that large for us to absorb.

Or at times of breathless awe, especially them. How does the saying go? Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away! And how does the Psalm say it? "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." Selah.

**So here's the single pitch for these summer days.** Pay some fresh attention to your own needs for selah . . . for taking a breath in the roominess of your own soul . . . for being still . . . for the kind of pause out of which the best of your life's music might follow.

Sadness and gladness. God knows there is room for both in you, and me, too. Life and loss. Laughter and tears. Hope and fear. Trust and its opposite. Sin and salvation. Mercy and peace. Depression and relief. The Psalms invite us to hold all of life as one, and our souls do have the room for such a diverse spread of living experience.

Or one more for today: times of being lost that lead to the relief of being found. And this one is not from the Psalter as the Psalms are properly called. This one is from my life. And it came to me in moments of both being breathlessly lost and breath-fully found. Selah.

Tim and Karen gave me a new GPS for father's day. Here's why. Pam and I had made a trip over Memorial Day weekend to visit friends in Pennsylvania. Our plans were to drive home through New York City and have lunch with Tim in Brooklyn. I had no fear of finding my way because my trusty 12 year old GPS has never failed me.

But when we got to Newark, Hoboken and Jersey City there was simply so much construction going on with detours of countless variety that my GPS froze. Completely froze! Solid! Not to worry. (That's the selah of breathless panic!)

After Pam commented unkindly to my GPS she cued up her iPhone and asked, "Siri, can you direct me for my current location to Prospect Street in Brooklyn?" Siri, impressed with herself said "calibrating." But she could do no better! To get us through that part of New Jersey and to the Holland Tunnel with so many detours even Siri was lost. We ended up down on the docks in Jersey City. Sighs too deep for words! Selah! Help!

Still trusting, eventually, we found our way. Selah! Breathe! Be still! And that is with an exclamation point! Our kids thought the whole story was pretty amusing. And that, my friends, is why I have a new GPS!

May selah - the pause for intentional breathing - be a part of your summer spirit! Amen.

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