



## Building for a Second Century

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Psalm 46

November 12, 2017

This psalmist makes the most astounding claims. He counsels us to let go of our fear, and trust God, even in the most chaotic of situations.

In the face of natural disasters, earthquakes, mountains collapsing, and roaring waters, this psalmist says, "Do not be afraid." Tell that to the people of northern California, as they deal with the aftermath of their landscape and livelihood and living spaces going up in flames. "Do not be afraid." Tell that to the people of Puerto Rico as they recover from the effects of roaring and raging waters.

The psalmist is brash. In the face of urban upheaval, he asserts God's presence and assures us that the city will never collapse. "God is in the city," says the psalmist. Tell that to the mothers of the south and west sides of Chicago, who worry every time their children set foot outdoors. "God is in the city." Tell that to the grandmothers who are raising kids left parentless by shootings and mass incarceration.

The psalmist keeps going. In the face of political chaos, nations roaring and governments collapsing, this psalmist says, "God is our place of safety." Tell that to the people of South Sudan, who have no idea where their next meal is coming from. Speak of the God's safety to the citizens of Aleppo.

In the face of whatever chaos you and I might be facing – the chaos of family life, or the collapse of our good health, or the reality that the institutions we trust seem to be falling apart – in the face of whatever might be roaring and raging in each of our lives, and sometimes it is a lot, this psalmist says, "Do not fear. God is our place of safety." This is an astounding claim, because, when we are in the middle of whatever chaos threatens to overwhelm our lives, it is often difficult to believe what the psalmist tells us, and, at times, it is much too glib an assertion for the moment in which it is spoken. Nonetheless, the psalmist sings it: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." This is an astounding claim.

And yet it is precisely this claim that the people of the First Congregational Church of Oak Park affirmed 100 years ago as they looked at a burned-out shell of a building and made the decision to rebuild. The fire began on September 5, 1916, when lightning struck the building shortly before 6am. By the time the pastor arrived at 6:20, "the spire was blazing fiercely," Dr. Barton later wrote.<sup>1</sup> The fire was halted about 9am, preserving the church house, and only an hour later the trustees met in the pastor's office while the fire was still smoldering. The Deacons met later in the day, and that evening a special meeting of the congregation convened at Unity Temple. The church elected a building committee that night.

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<sup>1</sup> William E. Barton, "Our Baptism of Fire," reflections included in the church bulletin September 10, 1916. First United Church of Oak Park archives. Thanks to Dan Pietrini, our archivist, for locating these materials.

It was not the first time our predecessor congregations had faced chaotic situations. First Congregational was founded in 1863 during the tumult of the Civil War, and many of its members were engaged in that struggle; a bronze plaque commemorating their service hangs in the narthex, and I was surprised by how long the list was. There are also plaques in the narthex commemorating service of members in WWI and, I think, WWII. Many more have served in other conflicts; just last week we heard a joy for a grandson home on leave from Iraq.

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.  
The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

The congregation has faced a lot of uproar: personal tragedies, national upheavals, and community conflict and change. Our congregation was born in the turmoil of the Civil Rights era, it is the union of two churches deeply involved in efforts to integrate Oak Park and forge more just and open housing policies.

So we come to today: 154 years after our earliest predecessor congregation was first founded; 100 years after our foremothers and forefathers made the bold decision to rebuild; 42 years after equally bold people made the decision to unite two strong churches and form First United. We stand on the shoulders of countless women and men who have served our congregations with love, integrity, and commitment.

We find ourselves continuing to make big decisions, in a context that has sometimes felt tumultuous. Our most recent bold venture is the decision to repair our masonry and roof, in the hopes that the building in which we work and worship will stand strong for another 100 years. This initiative has been years in the making, and I want to recognize the many people who have been involved in helping us make and implement plans to preserve this building. Getting this project off the ground has involved the work of past and present members of buildings and grounds, the finance committee, a special task force to figure out funding options, the Council, and maybe other entities. Please stand if you've been involved in any way. We want to say thank you.

But the point of doing this work on the building is not historical, and it's not architectural, though it is a contribution to Oak Park to maintain this beautiful structure. We all know that a church building is only as beautiful as the work that goes on inside and outside its doors. We have been busy on that front, too. Not only have we developed a robust strategic plan that is taking final shape and will be guiding us toward our future work and ministry, but we also have hopes and dreams about who we want to be, and they are aspirations that are not easily encapsulated in a document like a strategic plan.

Two weeks ago, on Reformation Sunday, several of you took the opportunity to channel Martin Luther and nail to a door in our church lounge some of your hopes for the church. These are some of the hopes you shared:

- That First United will be a church that practices kindness, acceptance, and love;
- That First United will be a church that practices justice - by being resourceful, making the world a better place, working for peace, and fighting fascism worldwide;
- That First United will be a place of forgiveness;
- That First United will be a holy place.

I was most intrigued by this statement on our door: “Start at the end.” When I read this, my first thought was about Harry Potter, whose golden snitch in book seven said, “I open at the close.” But, my second thought was, “Aha, here is the ending to my sermon.” Let me put aside my musings about Harry Potter, and move toward that other direction.

The psalmist ends our psalm with its most familiar and memorable phrase: “Be still and know that I am God” (NRSV). Listen to how a few other translations render this statement; I will begin with the most unsettling translations first:

1. Slacken! And acknowledge that I am God<sup>2</sup>
2. That’s enough! Now know that I am God (CEB)
3. Settle down, and acknowledge me as God<sup>3</sup>
4. Let be then, and learn that I am God (NEB)
5. Let go, and know that I am God<sup>4</sup>

Be still. There is a physicality about this verb that has less to do with silence than it does with having our fists clenched, and then relaxing them. So do that. Clench up your fists and your shoulders, and then let go. Relax. Be still in this way, says the psalmist. And know, acknowledge, learn that I am God.

As I said before, this is an astounding claim. We have a lot on our plate as a church, and the world is an uncertain place. We do not know what storms lay on the horizon. We do not know when or how there’s going to be an explosion in the fault lines on which we stand. Our impulse is to work, work, work, and do, do, do, so that we can build something that will withstand whatever turmoil comes our way. The psalmist says something else: Be still, and know that I am God. Settle down. Let be. Let go. Be still.

This is a reminder that all our hard work, productive and fine as it is, is not sufficient to meet the roaring and raging of life. In addition to all the good work we do, we need to ground ourselves in the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Be still. This is an invitation to trust. It is an invitation to faith. Whoever posted that sign on the door was right. Here at the end is

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<sup>2</sup> Ryan Cook. “Prayers that Form us: Rhetoric and Psalms Interpretation.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39.4 (2015), 451-467.

<sup>3</sup> William Brown. *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 116.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Alter. *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2007), 165.

where we need to begin. Be still and know that I am God. If we want to build a stronger, truer, and more faithful church, let us begin here, at the end.  
Amen.