

Hebrew Testament Reading: 46th Psalm
Gospel Reading: Matthew 7:21-29

word count: 1,543

There are echoes of the Finnish composer Sibelius in our worship today. Last Sunday I was in a UCC church in Minneapolis where I could hear them in the patriotic verses of “This is My Song” from our hymnal for Memorial Day. Now, they are present in the musical setting to the 46th psalm called, “Be Still My Soul.” The tune evokes so much feeling, it is included a third time in, “We Would Be Building,” which lifts up the words from Matthew about building on solid rock. I can’t help but notice that the different hymns to the same tune underscore two different scriptures that are meant to be read on the same day.

Although Sibelius’ tune has been used in many hymn settings, the music was written in honor of the national identity of Finland as that country struggled with itself. In 1889 he wrote the work that gained him international fame: *Finlandia*.

Finlandia owes its origin to the February Manifesto, issued by Russia, which curtailed free speech and press in Finland. A series of concerts were initiated to raise funds to fight the despotism of Russia, which was pushing the borders of its empire, and Sibelius provided a suite, *Finland Awake*. The fourth movement of that suite, “Suomi”—the Finnish name for Finland, was rewritten and isolated from the suite to become the work we know today. It was set against living tableaux on a stage, of images that evoked a sense of where the country was at that time.

My program from a concert at the CalPoly Symphony where this piece was performed states that, “Sibelius intended this work to evoke the emotions of an exile returning to his native country; in the dark days of Russian control. It is no wonder that these emotions are extreme. The opening brass chords paint a picture of the oppressive, dark tyranny imposed on the people. This is followed by a lyrical chorale in the woodwinds—hope, however tenuous, or perhaps even a supplication. Soon after the strings enter, we hear the battle for freedom erupt. Brass fanfares mingle with the sounds of battle. *We alternate between hope and danger. Suddenly we hear a prayer for peace in the woodwinds, accompanied by a soft shimmering of strings. The violins and cellos take the prayer up with more urgency.* This melody is the most memorable of his work and is arguably the most famous Finnish melody we know today. The prayer is answered and the whole orchestra glories in the triumph over oppression.”

Now as it was then, there are certainly tableaux of images that represent where we are today, some haunting, others hopeful.

For some of us at any given time, there is the feeling of being haunted by grief—the deep mourning that comes with personal loss (and I am thinking particularly today of Patricia and Loren Stalcup with the sudden loss of their son, Perry this week, while recognizing that many here present are working through some very personal grief as well). When entering into the cacophony of deep anguish, there is a natural longing for the in-breaking of peace and tranquility into the heart.

Cyclones and hurricanes, shifts both tectonic and paradigmatic, and the ever-present wonder of the penchant for war that pervades human history—all beat about our houses built on sand.

A word about the frequency of wars or the history of wars. Some years ago a professor from Brussels studied all the wars from 1496 B.C. to A.D. 1861. That was equivalent to 3,357 years of history. Out of those 3,357 years, 3,130 were years of war, and only 227 were years of peace. The ratio of war to peace was over fourteen years of war for every one year of peace. Since that time, the ratio has grown even greater.

The reasons? A great man once remarked, “All nations make decisions based on self interest and then defend them in the name of morality.”¹ “We are beginning to resemble the extinct dinosaurs who suffered from too much armor and too little brain.”²

Jesus is recorded as saying, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me.’”

Jesus warned that there is more to it than this. It is not enough to simply talk about Jesus endlessly. It is never enough simply to listen to his words, even if with reverent approval. If his words are to have any genuine effect in our lives, then it goes beyond hearing them to acting upon them and incorporating them into the events of our day-to-day living.

Sibelius’ “Finlandia” is well suited to hymnody. In “This is My Song,” you can feel the stirrings of love for nation, as he clearly intended to come through. “We Would Be Building,” is a song about constructing a new world based on a strong spiritual foundation.

Again, when you hear the same tune with the more familiar words, “Be Still, My Soul,” different emotions are released. The words take their meaning from the 46th Psalm—they speak of finding peace within—of “being still” and hearing that still, small voice within that let’s you know that God is with you, giving you strength for the journey. In the psalm, these words speak of a God that seeks an end to political turmoil and can bring peace.

The psalm is lifted up in times of great national distress, and is used as a scriptural balm for those who are mourning. It is a gift, as it not only gives strength to those who are directly grieving a loss, but reminds others of us that we are living out a particular experience in some form of solidarity with our country and with the rest of the world. If, as the psalm says, God can tell us to be still and know that God is with us, then with that knowledge we can speak the truth with love and kindness. If we can find that place of courage within ourselves where God resides, then we can put aside our ideology, forget our political differences, and speak the kind of truth in love that unites us, if not in common consensus, then in common concern, such as the corporate remembrance of courage and love of country that we saluted last week, and in the ongoing concern we have for those who are dealing with tremendous losses in their lives right now.

Jean Sibelius intended his music, known today as *Finlandia*, to evoke the emotions of an exile returning to his native country, and in his country’s dark days, it is no wonder that these emotions are extreme. Who doesn’t understand the feeling of being an exile somewhere or somehow? In the brashness of this work, there is a lyrical chorale in the woodwinds—hope, however tenuous, or perhaps a supplication. Brass fanfares mingle with the sounds of battle. We alternate between hope and danger. Suddenly we hear a prayer for peace in the woodwinds, and soon other instruments take the prayer up with more urgency.

At times, people who love peace must feel like exiles in their own country, both here and abroad. Amongst all of the brash sounds we hear in the ongoing work of war, in the devastations of natural disaster and uncertainty of our economy, and in the very deep hurt of personal grief, there must be the lyrical choral voices of hope and supplication. Perhaps you can be those voices; the calming sounds of care, and the builders of hope and peace. The brash tune will not change and cannot resolve without that small lyrical voice, plaintive and tenuous, rising up to call again and again and again for peace and calm.

“He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. Be still and know that I am God.” From the quiet stillness within, know that God is with you.

My former pastor once said: “Today, what Christians in particular need to remember is that God never stands for stability at the expense of truth, that God has no interest in any status quo whatsoever. For God does not want to freeze history, but rather to move it continually toward that ultimate goal of God’s kind of unity in justice and mercy.

“So what the Christian community needs to do above all else is to raise up men and women of thought and of conscience, adventuresome, imaginative people capable of both joy and suffering. And most of all they must be people of courage so that when the day goes hard and cowards steal from the field, like Luther they will be able to say, ‘My conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.’”³

And now, that same God invites us to this table...

Sermon Resources:

1. William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004 Pg. 80
2. *Ibid.* Pg. 100
3. *Ibid.* Pgs. 70-71

Scriptures for Sunday, June 1, 2008 Proper 4A, Finlandia

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; he utters his voice, 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 he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he 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.

Matthew 7: 21-29

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.