

Knowing and *Knowing*
Psalm 46
Rev. Wendy Vander Hart
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May God yet break forth truth and light from these words of scripture and sermon.

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, United Church of Christ where I hold my membership is 384 years old as it was founded in 1636. There have been significant celebrations of milestones particularly its 375th in 2008. And as churches go, this is a congregation very steeped in its history, since a significant wing of our United Church of Christ forbears have drawn upon the Cambridge platform for organizing its congregational ways and understanding God's calling upon it. You might think that over the centuries big anniversaries would simply be a rehearsal of the history with no new ground broken. However, in its 380th year, First Church in Cambridge had a revelation about its history. On the pages of the church annals was a simple fact – a total of 39 enslaved persons were members of First Church in Cambridge. Slavery was not abolished in Massachusetts until 1783. Over the course of history from its founding to that abolition vote was a span of 147 years where the founding pastor and subsequent pastors and congregants owned human beings for the purpose of slave labor.

It is likely that this history was repeated with each significant anniversary and stated in much the same way I just said it, as a fact to know. Where in the past it had simply been read as words on a page, the fact that there were 39 enslaved persons that were members at First Church in Cambridge came to hold new meaning in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, Ta Nehisi Coates' exploration of reparations for slavery and the unmasking of systemic white privilege in our nation. When First Church voted unanimously to "explore a project of public remembrance related to our complicity with Northern slavery," it began a journey from knowing to knowing.

There is much more to tell about this First Church in Cambridge journey from knowing to knowing, and it may be a harbinger of some of the work we will do as we engage some history work of First UCC as part of the Transition Team's task. If I have piqued your interest in diving more deeply into history and how it may speak to the search process – praise God. But for today I want to explore what it means to know.

Be still and know that I am God. There is knowing God and then there is knowing God. I doubt an appropriate translation of God's invitation to "Be still and know that I am God" would be "Be still and gather information about me." Or "Be still and get the facts about me." "Be still and know that I am God" is rather a remarkably intimate invitation. And how much more astounding is it that the One who created all that is, the One who is the Source of our Being, the One whose substance and form are complete mystery would want to be known.

For a blog by the Christian publisher Eerdmans, Carl McColman writes, "Obviously, the verse speaks to us in God's voice: "know that I am God." It is a proclamation that God exists, and that God can be known. Especially in our age of profound cynicism, skepticism, and nihilism, this is a bold statement indeed. Even people of faith sometimes find it difficult to truly know God. We know about God, but do we know God? J.I. Packer's classic bestseller, *Knowing God*, sold over a million copies because it addresses this very question: Knowing about God is not enough, we are called to know God, directly, intimately, incarnationally."¹

¹ Carl McColman, Eerdword, The Eerdmans Blog, September 2019
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Maybe you have heard the phrase to “know someone in the biblical sense”- meaning in the most intimate way possible. Some Bible translations, such as the King James Bible, translate the Hebrew word יָדַע as know even in sexual contexts, giving rise to lines like "And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived."

Could it be that God would want to be known that closely as the biblical sense of knowing? It is possible! In the biblical sense of knowing there is vulnerability, surrender, opening up, letting go, desisting. As we have explored this verse, the translation of “be still” might be better as “let yourselves go,” “surrender,” or as one author notes “die to ourselves.”

The command to “be still” is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to know God.

And how crafty is God who is aware that humans like to know things. Knowing brings a certain comfort with it. We can rest easier because we can predict things when we know them. The knowing of the head alone finds solace in facts and predictability and a veneer of control.

In contrast, the knowing of the heart alone risks living with unresolved questions, feeling guilty about doubts, unmoored by conflicting propositions.

Maybe this is stating the obvious, but we are living in a time of great un-knowing. Scientists are scrambling to understand the coronavirus. Black Lives Matter and the justice-minded impulses to dismantle systems that have privileged white people over brown and black people are being unmasked. We cannot yet define what “normal” is anymore. Our usual knowing is in flux at best. And yet, it is precisely in this world that God is made known and seeks to be made known.

There is knowing and then there is *knowing*.

Do we really want to know God? Annie Dillard once wrote, “It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”²

To know God is a both/and proposition- it is at once grounding and unsettling. Knowing God demands the integration of head and heart, the mashing together of surrender and investing, the movement of both letting go and taking hold.

There is knowing and then there is *knowing*. Back to the story of First Church in Cambridge. Two years after voting to explore a project of remembrance there is no statue yet, no model for a space on the church grounds, no plan for a monument, plaque or lecture series. The church is still in the process of knowing the impact of its history. They have taken pilgrimages to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, AL, the African-American Museum in DC, the Royall House- a local plantation preserved in Medford, MA. They have done walking tours around Harvard Square to see the complicity with slavery roots of wealth that persist in a state where the average assets of a black person is \$8.00 as compared to a white person who has average assets of \$237,000. Church leaders have conversed with people of color of a different class stratum than the academically minded congregation. The congregation has asked deep questions about reparations. Meetings have dived into scripture, personal reflection, singing, reading books together, praying and more contemplation. To know, they are investing time.

When it comes down to knowing, it requires investing time. Time for the head and time for the heart. Any kind of relationship benefits from investing time – why would our relationship with God be any different?

² Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk
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Let's face it, all of us want to know with some certainty about the path of our life and whether God is on it with us or not. And it is much grayer than the stark choice between confidence and faith. But it is real, and we navigate it as best we can with the support of community and the trust in our knowable and unknowable God.

So, we rely on relationship. And human relationship, community and partnership will disappoint us, but it is what we have. We are assured in the Psalm that one part of our relationship with God will never fail us. We trust in God even amid doubt, turmoil, and trial.

God says, "Be still and know that I am God!" God says, "remember in what you are grounded." Remember where your strength lies. Remember where you are renewed in spirit. Remember me. God says, "desist from your striving, rest, take heart I am here." God says, "be still, but not passive, there is much to speak about, act upon, live for in my name." Be grounded and know that you are not alone. God says, surrender your anxiety and partner with me. May it be so. Amen.