



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**  
Presbyterian (USA)

# The Practice of Pausing

SCRIPTURE:  
Psalm 3

March 10, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Anna Owens

Our Scripture reading comes from the Book of Psalms—early on, in chapter 3. It's considered a psalm of David and it contains the directive 'Selah,' which is a word that most scholars agree means mostly nothing, but indicates a time to pause. It is perhaps most closely related to a modern musical rest or a break in music in which an instrument or voice pauses before continuing. It's not silence, necessarily, but a break nonetheless.

If you're reading this from the NRSV, you'll note that the Scripture header refers to this as "A Psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom." The drama of David and Absalom could have been a storyline on "Game of Thrones." Absalom was David's third eldest son and his story is one that involves his sister, Tamar, and a scene of graphic sexual violence that we won't get into tonight. But Absalom has his oldest brother murdered and flees from David's wrath. He's allowed, eventually, to come back to Jerusalem, where his father, David, is king. But he uses that time to gain power and influence—eventually usurping the throne, which is when David flees and writes this psalm.

Eventually, Absalom is routed by David's army in the battle of Ephraim Woods and he's killed. Scripture tells us that David cries out for him and is deeply grieved by all that has happened between the two of them.

Listen now for God's word to us from King David, crying out to God in this third psalm:

O LORD, how many are my foes!

Many are rising against me;  
many are saying to me,

"There is no help for you in God." Selah  
But you, O LORD, are a shield around me,  
my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.  
I cry aloud to the LORD,

and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah  
I lie down and sleep;  
I wake again, for the LORD sustains me.  
I am not afraid of ten thousands of people  
who have set themselves against me all around.  
Rise up, O LORD!  
Deliver me, O my God!  
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;  
you break the teeth of the wicked.  
Deliverance belongs to the LORD;  
may your blessing be on your people! Selah

We're more halfway through Lent. We've covered the practices of prayer, fasting, and letting go. Today we'll take a pause—or we'll consider the practice of pausing. I've appreciated the way that Rodger has shared how he models spiritual practices in his own life, so I thought I might do the same.

I have a yoga practice that's deeply important to me—that invites me to pause. I used to practice daily at home but that's easier said than done with a very busy three-year-old in the same house. But every Friday I take the time to pause at a yin yoga class that's become a nonnegotiable part of my week.

Breath, and how you breathe, is instrumental to a yoga practice. In fact, breath and movement are intertwined—to flow in yoga means to move with your breath. You might hear a yoga instructor say, in some poses, that you inhale to lengthen and you exhale to deepen the stretch. I shared on Ash Wednesday that I think that Lent, while it feels like a long inhale leading up to the deep, Alleluia breath of Easter, is actually the exhale of the Christian year. That's part of the reason Rodger is leading us through this series on spiritual practices. We deepen the practice of our faith in Lent. We stretch our muscles to see just how far we can go.

In yin yoga, which is my favorite, you hold each stretch for a least a minute, often longer. It requires

a deep concentration of the mind as it requires a deep stillness of the body. When you hold poses for that long, you literally stretch the muscles to the point of breaking down the fascia, which hydrates them, and gives them the ability to ultimately stretch further in the future. It's a great practice for runners and endurance athletes, of which I am neither, but I find that it's an opportunity for me to train my mind, to enter stillness, to pause, and to just breathe.

To manage the stillness and the concentration, it helps to practice good yogic breathing, which is breathing in for as long as you breathe out, with a pause at each inhale and exhale. Even breaths. Let's try. We'll breathe in for 3, then pause for 1, then breathe out for 3, and pause for 1. This type of breathing regulates the nervous system. It communicates to your brain that you're OK; that you're safe. It's a great practice to keep in your pocket for moments of stress and anxiety. Inhale-2-3-pause, exhale-2-3-pause. Inhale-2-3-selah, exhale-2-3-selah.

This musical instruction, *selah*, appears in many, but not all, of the psalms. It first appears here, in this third psalm, and it breaks the psalm into three parts. In the first part, David laments to God the great number of his enemies and that those around him are telling him it's pointless to trust in God. But after a pause, David affirms his faith in God, "But you, O Lord, are a shield around me." After another pause, he doubles down on that faith, builds on it, cries out with courage and strength that not only will God sustain him, God will strike down all of his enemies, for God is his deliverance.

I chose this psalm because it's the first place where this marker, *selah*, appears. And then I almost chose a different one. I didn't want to talk about enemies and foes. It almost seems gauche in 2024. We don't have enemies, at least not in this sense, right?

We're not going to talk about whether God takes sides in conflict because there are real people around the world (and maybe in this room) experiencing pain and sorrow and perhaps even violence at the hands of others and the last thing I want you to hear is that God isn't with you, in very real ways, through that. But I'm wondering what the pause, the *selah*, teaches us about how we live in this world—imperfect and broken as we are.

Many of us likely don't think of having enemies like David and Absalom or an army rising up against us. But we certainly see some people as "in" and some as "out," some as "with us" and some "against us." We see some as worth it and others as not.

On Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights, about 45 people across our two campuses are learning about our complex faith—especially as it relates to the impact and realities of racism in our nation from its founding to today. We have ground rules for discussion in order to foster respectful conversation around a subject that can be deeply personal and about which people can have a variety of experiences and opinions. Because as the Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson is fond of saying, "If we can't talk about it in church, then where can we talk about it?"

I didn't create these ground rules; I've borrowed them from Interfaith America, previously known as the Interfaith Youth Core, based out of Chicago. They include things like "everyone has the right to pass," and "be aware of how often your voice is present." The two I like most and that relate most closely to one another, are these: "When asking questions, be curious and genuine," and "have a generosity of spirit. Assume the best intent, as we all struggle to communicate sometimes." Be curious and genuine. Have a generosity of spirit. Assume the best intent.

I don't have to tell you that there is a lot of fear in our world today. We are deeply suspicious of one another. We have enemies and foes, people outside of our trusted circle, and we keep our distance. Rather than being curious about others, we make assumptions. Rather than approaching difference with wonder, we close ourselves off, certain we already know the answers to any questions we could think to ask.

I wonder if this ancient musical instruction might teach us a thing or two about that. Bryan Stevenson, the civil rights lawyer who wrote "Just Mercy" and founded the Equal Justice Initiative, talks about the necessity of proximity for there to be positive progress in our future. We can only fear the things we don't understand. How can we understand something when we're standing too far away to see it?

Eboo Patel is the founder of the Interfaith America, which came up with the ground rules for discussion I use in my classroom. I heard him speak a few years ago at the College Conference at Montreat. His

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expertise, you might imagine, is inter- and-multi-faith work. He's passionate about connecting people of all religious backgrounds to one another because many of our faiths share core values and principles of justice, mercy, and peace. He's helped communities tackle issues like banning predatory payday lending practices. He's seen Baptists and Muslims and Mormons and Jews and Unitarians sitting around tables, showing up at town halls, protesting, and breaking bread together. He's been asked, "How do these groups agree to come together when they're so different? When their values don't align?" How, for instance, do female pastors work with those who don't affirm the ordination of women? Eboo's answer is that we focus on the issues at hand and treat each other as human beings about the rest. We get close to each other, we find common ground, and learn to see things perhaps a little differently in the process.

What would happen if, when we encountered those whose lives are very different than ours, we practiced a holy pause? What would happen if, when we find that our hackles are rising, and we're bristling against something someone else is saying, we took a beat. Held our breath. Took a step back. Reminded ourselves to practice a generosity of spirit, to be curious and genuine, and try again?

Stillness can be sacred. The moment between holding on and letting go can fit within it the entire fabric of the universe. God stretches us in the pauses, breaks down the fascia of our muscles so that we might stretch even further still.

Let's sit in stillness for a moment. Perhaps for longer than a moment. Close your eyes. Get comfortable. Take a deep breath. Invite God's Spirit in. Just be.

God meets us in the pauses and God gives us the space to meet one another in the pauses, too. We are called to do holy, sacred, hard, and beautiful things together. We can't do that if we're not taking space to listen, to learn, to step back, to evaluate our own assumptions and intentions. We also can't do this

holy and sacred and hard and beautiful work if we're not taking time to sit in the presence of the Divine within and among and around us.

Celtic Christianity places a strong emphasis on the spirituality of the physical world, which is a remnant of ancient, pre-Christian Celtic traditions that worshiped a people called the *tua da danan*, who were believed to live just below the surface of the earth. And because these *tua da danan* lived so close to the surface, ancient Celtic people held the physical world in high regard and believed that every blade of grass, every speck of dirt, every drop of water, was imbued with the divine. They took great care to notice those things, to pause, and look around, and greet the divine in their midst because they might miss it if they didn't.

Friends, I also believe that every blade of grass and speck of dirt and drop of water is imbued with the presence of the divine. Not because the *tua da danan* live just under the surface of the earth but because God created it. And God also took things a step further. Not only did our great, mysterious, holy, Triune God make this world in which we live, that very same God touched it, lived among it, ate of its fruit and drank of its vine. God touched this earth, and how could anything that God touched not be redeemed?

So look around. Take a breath. Give thanks, even as you cry out to God in lament of the state of our world. Practice pausing every now and again. As the earth pauses in this moment before the full bloom of spring, allow your soul to be filled with the presence of the living God, that we might recognize the face of God in ourselves and in each other.

This week, give yourself permission to rest. Rest in the knowledge and love of God. Close your eyes, even just for a moment, and delight in your very existence. Meet God where God longs to meet you. And may we do so for the life of the Church. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.