

LISTENING ALONGSIDE



ECHOING CHRIST

Lenten Devotions 2017

**Wednesday,
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Stop and Listen

By Elizabeth Edwards

Have you ever wondered, while reading through the Psalms, what "Selah" means? If you have, you certainly aren't alone. That little word, written in italics between stanzas of many of the Psalms (and used once in a poetic section of Habakkuk), is sometimes questioned but most often ignored.

It appears to be from the same Hebrew root as סָלַח (calah) which, among other things, can mean to measure or weigh. Scholars agree that it is a difficult concept to translate. After that, there seems to be little agreement. Some have posited that, since Psalms is the hymnal of the Hebrew people, it is a musical term, perhaps an instruction for singing, denoting a refrain or rest in the music. Others have proposed that it marks a point in the hymn when the congregation paused in order to receive teaching or instruction.

One of the most compelling ideas I have read, however, is that the phrase was actually meant as instruction to the congregation to pause in order to "measure" what had just been said or sung. In other words, "Stop and listen carefully." The Amplified Bible translates Selah as "pause and think of that."

It seems a sad commentary that even when doing something as important as reading Scripture or worshiping God, we have to be told to stop, to pause, to give attention to what we are hearing. Perhaps the Psalmist recognized that those in his congregation needed a reminder. I confess that I often do. I suspect many of us do.

And if we need this instruction in the midst of worship, how much more do we need to be reminded as we go about the busyness of our lives each day? If only we had a reminder of *Selah* every time we hear our children laughing or hold them to soothe their hurts. Or when we receive a phone call from a loved one or run into an old friend. Or when we see a sunset or hear music which stirs our souls or see a homeless person asking for help or hear of an injustice reported on the evening news.

Perhaps Lent is a kind of *Selah* on our spiritual journey, a reminder to slow down in order to pray, to give thanks, to confess, to turn our focus inward, to take stock of what we find in our own hearts, to be still in the presence of God, to be mindful of God's goodness and grace, and to listen. Perhaps Lent is a pause in the rhythm of our lives, a refrain which allows us to be attentive to the ways God is at work in the world, an interlude which creates time and space for us to stop and listen carefully.

Prayer

You, you are the one we address, always you, only you...
who has given us life, who waits for us to answer.

We, toward you, speak and remain tongue-tied,
for we lack words that are honest enough, and dangerous enough,
and fierce enough to match you.

We do not speak first, but after our mothers and fathers,
who knew cadences of honesty about our troubles,
who knew cadences of danger about your presence,
who knew cadences of fierceness to fit our rage and loss.

So we speak to you words that we have always spoken:
words of praise and adoration:

... into your gates with thanksgiving, into your courts with praise...

words of confession and remorse:

... against you and only you have we sinned...

words of thanks and astonishment:

... you have turned our mourning into dancing...

words of rage unabated:

... dash their heads against the rocks.

So many words we need to speak
to you from whom no secret can be hid,
you beyond us, you with us, you for us,
you with ears bent close to our lips,
You... and our woes turned toward you, always you, only you,
yet again you. Amen.

—Walter Brueggemann

From *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*

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.
Selah

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.
Selah

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.
Selah