

Confirmation Sunday Reflection: “What Do I Believe”

May 21, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Psalm 46

Lexi:

Be still and know that I am God.

The line from Psalm 46 is well known and well used. We at First Church have used these words when we as a community have needed words of comfort and beauty many a-time. A quick google search of this verse brings up a handful of meditative songs and soothing nature scenes on YouTube, as well as a whole bunch of hits on Pinterest and Etsy for lovely hand-lettered artwork on greeting cards, on mugs, on t-shirts, etc., etc. - all filed under “inspirational quotes.” Our Confirmands, too, just received a watercolor print of a delicate leafy branch with these words printed underneath. (Confirmands, hold them up, so we can see... or to get a closer look, find them at the reception after worship!)

Sarah:

Be still and know that I am God.

The words are calming and grounding. Just saying them aloud makes me relax my shoulders and breathe more deeply. But what about the rest of Psalm 46? Is it all about meditating in silence to gain personal insight? Let’s go back and take a look - Confirmands, just think of this as an extension of our class last fall entitled “Meeting God Through Scripture.”

Lexi:

The Psalm begins by naming God as “our refuge and strength,” and “a very present help.” We are encouraged to not be afraid, to know that “God’s got this.” We hear this phrase that “God is with us and is our refuge” twice more, once in the middle and at the end. Three times in eleven verses - that’s something to pay attention to, right? But what else is here? Let’s pull out some other images in the Psalm:

Lexi: ...the mountains shake in the heart of the sea!

Sarah: ...the waters roar and foam!

Lexi: ...the nations are in an uproar!

Sarah: ...empires crumble!

Sarah:

Woah - not so calm and quiet! Perhaps God's instruction is less meditative and more of an order, kind of like a parent talking to a squirming child. "Hush! Be still!" "Enough!" Or maybe, God is saying, "Hey, it's okay. Life is stormy and can feel out of control. Know that I'm here with you. Get out of your own head. Let's ride the waves together."

Lexi:

Be still and know that I am God.

However, we hear it, these words seem like sound advice to remember, especially on this journey of exploring faith through Confirmation.

... and what a Confirmation year it's been! Six students, two teachers, two guest speakers, and a whole lot of showing up week after week, to talk about our tradition of Christianity and our relationship to our faith. Back in September, at our Orientation meeting, we asked students and parents, "What is confirmation?" We got some great responses...

Sarah: It's joining the church

Lexi: It's a class that prepares you

Sarah: It's a chance to think about "why be church and why be a member"

Lexi: It's a place to ask the question, "What do I believe?"

Sarah: It's a developmental bridge

Lexi: It's your heritage

Sarah: And importantly, it's your journey, not your parents' journey.

Lexi:

The ways in which the Confirmands claimed this journey as their own continue to amaze us. We have learned that these young people have a lot to teach us adults.

Sarah:

Each Confirmand wrote a Statement of Faith, which they read aloud in our last session a few weeks ago. Their statements are thoughtful and heartfelt, revealing an understanding of how one's faith can

hold questions and uncertainties. Their courage and their comfort with honesty, their willingness to take risks and to ask hard questions will stay with us even after we send them out on their way to continue the good work we started together.

Lexi:

As we have discovered, and you will, too, in a moment, each and every Confirmand has tried their hand at being a theologian this year, and each has succeeded.

Here are some things they had to say about God...

God does not seem like a person, rather a being that holds the power of love and hope. God loves everybody unconditionally, and instills goodness in people's hearts. God is a symbol for what love is.

[Erik]

Sarah:

Science is fact. I do not believe faith is fact. Each and every one of us has a conscience, and God's relationship to each person is different. I don't think God is a thing. God is a thought. God is comfort. I don't think God is a physical being; I believe that God is a conscience that each and every one of us builds. I think God reflects a relationship to self. **[Owen]**

Lexi:

I feel as if God loves and forgives [others], in the same way that God does for me. God seems to unconditionally love all other people, no matter if they believe in God or not. **[Erik]**

Sarah:

Here are a few thoughts they had about Jesus:

Jesus, for me, is a manifestation of what God believes in... Jesus creates an easier road for me to get to God. **[Campbell]**

Lexi:

Jesus to me is someone to think of as a role model, while remembering that making mistakes is natural.

[Freddie]

Sarah:

*I understand Jesus as someone who always forgave and cared for others. I know Jesus in my life as someone who doesn't care about my mistakes and trusts that I will learn and grow from them. **[Ada]***

Lexi:

As we spent time with the Bible, we considered questions like, "Who wrote this?" "Why was this particular story chosen to be included in the Bible?" and "How does this passage relate to something in my current day life?"

Here are a few of their thoughts about the Bible:

*The Bible is symbolism. Every single sentence represents something. I don't believe some of the stuff happened, but it's still important even if it didn't happen. There are more important truths than facts that can be conveyed with metaphor. **[Owen]***

Sarah:

*I think the beauty of texts, especially holy ones, is that they are flexible. I believe in the Ten Commandments, teachings of love, ways to love one another, yourself, and the world. This text helps me love myself and others with my whole heart, and to be secure in myself. **[Campbell]***

Our Confirmation syllabus is full of BIG topics - you can see the list on page 13 of the bulletin - and several of the students commented on concepts like Religious Pluralism, Forgiveness, and Meeting God Through Experience in their statements:

*I think to really understand any religion, you need to understand other religions. I want to learn more about other religions. **[Owen]***

Lexi:

I understand that the Christian church has been used to invalidate other religions and beliefs, and I hate that this is a part of our history. Religious pluralism is important to me, as I feel that each person's opinions and beliefs should be treated with respect. [Campbell]

Sarah:

Of all the different things that God teaches, there is one teaching that stands out to me the most. That is the importance of forgiveness. God teaches us to forgive, and this is something that resonates with me in particular, because I have often found it hard to forgive, and I believe it is important, because people shouldn't be judged on their mistakes. [Erik]

Lexi:

Music can be felt and understood by anyone, no matter where they come from or what language they speak. Music connects us all, like God. [Owen]

Sarah:

What is my purpose? My purpose is loving someone; it's very important to me. My purpose is hanging with my family. My purpose is going to classes. People need me for help... I help friends to pay more attention in class. Sometimes I sing choir songs and play piano. [Graham]

Lexi:

Finally, we asked the Confirmands to think about their relationship to First Church, and about how they fit into this faith community. Here are a few of their descriptions of this place:

I feel blessed to have an amazing religious community where I feel safe to practice my belief, and that I am loved for who I am, no matter my sexuality or gender. I've never had to hide a part of myself because of my church community's beliefs, and I am beyond grateful for that. I feel so connected to my church community and I feel very safe here. [Campbell]

Sarah:

I care a lot about women's rights, as well as disabilities rights, and more. It's important to have a community to talk to about issues like that, and I think a church is a good example of a community that takes issues seriously. Church can be a place of worship, but also a group of people who band together to get things done, even if it doesn't involve God. An example of this that really resonated with me was Hilary Hopkins, who identified as an Atheist but still came to First Church and did amazing work.

[Freddie]

Lexi:

*Everyone has a different view of who or what exactly God, religion, faith, Jesus, and church are and I'm still figuring mine out. I may not know how I want religion to fit in my life right now but I'm willing to figure it out over the next few years before making a definitive decision. This leads me to the decision that I will get confirmed and become a member of First Church in Cambridge. **[Ada]***

Sarah:

I'm excited and a little scared to be confirmed, but I understand that my beliefs will probably change over time, which I'm okay with. Confirmation will make me part of a community that I've been so proud to be in, and I hope I can continue to spread a message of love, acceptance, and justice with our church.

[Campbell]

Lexi:

*I have been going to First Church in Cambridge for my whole life, and it is a great caring community. Church is an important place for me because it is a place where people go to learn how to love and forgive each other. **[Erik]***

Sarah:

*I feel like First Church welcomes everyone, especially people who are unsure and questioning (like me). [First Church stands for] welcoming everyone and anyone to explore the idea of God. Now, as I'm being confirmed and baptized, I'm going to take both of those values in with me. **[Freddie]***

Lexi:

To me the Church is a place where people go to be part of a community, to feel accepted and heard. I think that the Church stands for forgiveness, acceptance, community, peace, and kindness. [Ada]

Sarah:

Where do I belong? I belong here in Cambridge. Sometimes I belong in so many places and buildings in Cambridge. Sometimes I belong at church. [Graham]

Lexi:

I want to be part of this community in some meaningful way. [Owen]

This community, this place where love and justice are made real, has been a reflection of God's strength and help and has been a refuge for each and every confirmand today. These young people have grown up in this congregation, they have been cared for and loved by this gathered body. You have seen them mature and change and meet challenges with grace, hope, and good humor. And, now we have a charge to all you people in the pews. We pray that you include them in the life of First Church in a new way. You've walked before them as elders in faith. Now it's time to walk *alongside* them in this mutual journey of faith and discipleship. They are artists, actors, activists, athletes, leaders, pray-ers, environmental stewards, musicians and people of deep, flexible, and agile faith. What a joy to welcome them all fully into membership among us today.

And Confirmands, we will say one more time, that no matter where this journey of life and faith takes you, you are always welcome here. This is a spiritual home for you and we love you. The world needs people like you, and we are so glad to walk with you in this ongoing journey of being committed to asking the question, "What do I believe?"