

Genesis 1: 31; 2:1-3
James 4:5-8a
Matt. 14:13-14; 22-23

March 27, 2022

Seek Solitude

This is week five of Lent. Lent, you remember, is that forty-day period before Easter when re-dedicate themselves to following our Savior, Christ Jesus. We've long made it practice here to encourage people to be in a small group – even if it's only for the six weeks of Lent - to nurture their faith with other believers. This year we've all entered into "The Being Challenge" – a forty-day challenge to be like Jesus. That is, embody His words and actions in our daily lives.

Most of us are on autopilot for about half of what we do each day. We all live by habit; good habits or bad habits serve some purpose. It's a lifelong challenge to replace bad habits with good ones that produce a better quality of life. But not all good habits are created equal – some are better than others. "Keystone habits" are better than other good habits because they carry over into other aspects of our lives. Keystone habits create a domino effect that changes other areas of your life and can lead to other good habits.

Observing the life of Jesus, we can identify 5 Keystone habits. So far, we've focused on three: He was committed to community, He studied Scripture, He prioritized prayer. Today I'm talking about the fourth key habit: seeking solitude ... that is, being alone with God.

This one's fairly easy for me. I'm an introvert. And I married an introvert! So, we have long practiced being quiet together or apart! My energy is refilled by being alone – often in the great outdoors – that's where I find moments to be alone with God recharge my batteries.

Last week we saw how prayer brings us direction in a chaotic and confusing world. Solitude brings focus in a loud and noisy world.

Sabbath Time

Most of us are familiar with the 10 Commandments and the one that says, *Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy*, Exodus 20:8. We think of sabbath as a time of rest ... and so it is. The Bible's account of God creating the world, and all that is in it, says this: *By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work*, Gen. 2:2. Ordained by God, there is a healthy rhythm of life for us found in sabbath rest. Sabbath is about seeking God first and giving God the best of your attention, heart and mind. Christians modified the Jewish week by making Sunday the day of worship and rest because that is the day of resurrection. Rest your heart and mind on God, seek God's presence and guidance, then go out to your work.

A genuine sabbath time must include time of solitude. Yet is not about being completely alone. It's about being alone with God – removing for a time, all other distractions (including all other people and relationships). The Sabbath is there so that we remember what God has already done for us – most supremely through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Sabbath teaches us to slow down from all of our activities and striving so that we may hear God's word for us.

Is It Good To Be Alone?

You may well remind me that the first of the Keystone habits we focused on, was Community. Remember: God Himself is community as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Made in God's image, we're wired for community. *The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him,'* Gen 2:18. So how do we square that with solitude?

Yet after the first humans fell into sin and became alienated from God, they severed their bonds of community with God. As a result, we need to restore community with our heavenly Father, so that His presence can restore the goodness in us that we were designed for. To do that we need one-on-one time with God. In a word: solitude.

Solitude is the intentional practice of being alone for the purpose of hearing from God. Jesus modeled this in His life on earth. When we look at times when Jesus sought solitude it wasn't so He could just get away from people, isolating Himself from others. It was so He could be alone with His heavenly Father without the distractions of people. After feeding the five-thousand with five loaves and two fish...

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, Matt. 14:22-23.

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land, Mark 6:45-47.

He went to places that allowed him to shut out the world so that He could hear God. In solitude He prayed – not always doing the talking. For disciples of Jesus, solitude is the same ... a time to be alone with God. When we draw near to God, He speaks. *Come near to God and He will come near to you, James 4:8.* God is not a distant and unapproachable judge, detached from our lives of struggle. *God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son...* God wants to be with us, allowing us to soak up His presence. *Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere, Psalm 84:10.*

Archbishop William Temple once said: "Your religion is what you do with your solitude." So, when you're alone what do you do? What do you think about?

Terrific Servant, Terrible Master

Today, we have more choices before us than any generation of humans that ever lived: choice in our diets, our transportation, our communication, our clothing, and many other things. In addition to an abundance of goods, we enjoy technological innovations that give us unparalleled access to information and communication.

The smart phone is one of the most revolutionary instruments ever devised. It's simply unbelievable! We can see our grandkids and talk to them in real time. Heck, we can see and talk to 'Ofa's family half-way around the globe! For that matter, we can get videos and text about events anywhere in the world – all on this little device, that also takes better photos than my old SLR camera, and records videos.

Yet, this very same device can be the breeding ground of bad habits, and a time-waster beyond belief. Every day is a battle for our minds. People, companies, clubs, activities, and organizations all fight for space in our minds. Even good things can become bad things when they take God's place in your heart. Maybe you've seen the illustration of the jar and the sand and the rocks...

What are you allowing into your mind every day? What are you missing because of all the things you're letting in or all the stuff you're spending your precious time on? What are your distractions in life and what are they keeping you from? With so many good things coming into your life, are you missing the best?

With all this information, it is difficult to discern what is mis or dis or false information. The internet has made it possible to spread rumors at lightening-speed. You've heard that saying: what's difference between a conspiracy theory and the truth? About six-12 months. [As we discover more about imposed COVID policies, as news trickles out about policies from school boards to corporate boards, as non-partisan groups demand election integrity, and as we've seen the bold face of censorship in social media, many Americans are wondering who can be trusted to tell the truth. Once trusted sources can no longer be relied upon and our God-given liberty is being stolen.] It is now more vital than ever that Christians hold fast to God's word – seeking the truth of who God really is and who we are meant to be. *Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom, Isaiah 40:28.*

Our being challenge during Lent is to wake up to the true truth that is in God, so that we can understand what is going on in the world. We need to wait upon the Lord, to hear His voice.

Getting alone with God brings focus to our very busy, loud, distracting world, so that we can live purposefully, as God gives us to know our purpose. Jesus had focus. He was so in tune with God that He never wavered in His purpose. That's our aim as well. The goal of Eastern religions is to empty the mind. Biblical meditation, by contrast, is to fill the mind and soul with God and God's Word. *Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things, Col. 3:2.*

The Whispering God

The Old Testament tells of the prophet Elijah, who boldly proclaimed God's power in the face of a hostile king and queen. Fleeing for his life Elijah took refuge in a mountain cave. *The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper, 1 Kings 19:11-12.*

God is still calling people today ... but too many don't hear His voice ... too busy, too distracted. Maybe they're expecting a thunderclap to get their attention. [Years ago, when famous football coach Tony Dungy came to the Indianapolis Colts as their new head coach, he called a team meeting. All the players and all the staff were assembled as he addressed them. He never raised his voice, spoke evenly in a conversational manner. He told all assembled they would never hear him speak any louder than he was speaking that day. He didn't need to. Lovie Smith, coach of the Chicago Bears, speaking of his mentor Tony Dungy said, "We talked about how to do it, being a teacher instead of screaming and yelling, all that stuff." Of course, we know the rest of the story... the Colts, under Dungy's guidance finished 1st in the AFC South five years in a row, and went on to win the Superbowl in 2006].

Friends it isn't always the loudest voices that have the most important things to say. More often than not the loud voices are covering up their lack of content or seriousness. These days we live with a cacophony of voices from every kind of source, all demanding our attention. Yet, the most serious voice, the most meaningful voice, you will ever hear comes from outside of all those other voices. I urge you to find a quiet place, to be quiet, and listen for the Almighty's voice. Creation itself reveals the beauty of His handiwork that I may hear the whisper of His resounding voice...

January's ground of millions of crystals sparkles with an orange-pink hue from a setting sun. All forms stand silhouetted and still, as shadows lengthen across open spaces. The only sound is crunching boots marching through a pristine snow cover. Forests turn to dark masses and meadows to graying seas. Very shortly a rising moon spreads its yellowing light and shadows of individual trees become distinct. Stand still. There is no earthly sound. Only heaven speaks.

On the far side of the globe a heavenly panorama displays a glory like no other. The Milky Way, like a long, luminescent cloud, mistily streams across the sky in all its wonder and hint of mysterious worlds far beyond. As though suspended somewhere between heaven and earth, time stands still in that silence of a darkness, illuminated only by this star-lit canopy. There is no sound but the voice of the Creator gently rustling through leaves of banana and sugar-cane, whispering the sounds of eternity.

From time to time, a few moments of silence brush against us, inviting a graceful grasp of God's mysterious presence. It is a wordless time — not for lack of words, but not needing words. It is an interlude of settling within the soul — a time-free epiphany that permits us to touch the edges of God's cloak and our union with all others. Without that touch we will only know the world in feeble fragments.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. Psalm 19: 1-4.

God is whispering to you, saying... "I love you, with an everlasting love." "I forgive you, even to the depths of your soul." "I chose you, for all time." "I will come back for you." Whether your days are

busy or not, do something counterintuitive: step aside, step apart, quiet yourself in His presence. Be filled with the One who can refresh your soul.

...how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power? Job 26:14.