

To Hear God's Voice

I Kings 19:1-13

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We live in a fast-paced world. We are constantly on the go. We complain of being tired, yet seem to never take the time we profess to need to find solace and rest. Many people say, "I just wish I had more than 24 hours a day!" And my usual reply is, "No, because you would probably just fill them up with more stuff to do." Now, please don't misunderstand me. There is a need for us to find useful activity in our world. Being idle is not the goal we should strive for, as it will only lead to boredom and laziness. Yet, most of us err on the side of hyper-activity, without the benefit of considering what we are busy at.

Contemplation; reflection; deliberation; consideration; these are all words that many of us don't want to deal with. They take time, and they are too revealing, and we just don't want to take a good look at ourselves. It's too painful, because we might not like what we see, and we might come to realize that we need to make some changes.

And especially don't talk about the goodness of "solitude"! If there's one thing we don't want, it's to be alone. When was the last time you really looked at yourself in the mirror? Wes Stafford, the CEO of Compassion International, said in a recent tape that our Forgiveness class listened to, that most men never even look at themselves in the mirror, except for shaving, and then they never really focus on the person, just the whiskers and the facial imperfections. I imagine most women are not that different; oh, they may spend more time looking at themselves in the mirror, but are probably overly critical, finding smoothing creams for those unwanted wrinkles, and foundations to add color and zest to their appearance. But really looking at the inner person? Well, that's too painful. We'll save it for another day, right?

So instead, we run around doing "good things", and become so exhausted that we complain about having to do good things! That's essentially what happened in our scripture lesson of today. Elijah, one of the great prophets in the Old Testament, had just come off of a tremendous victory over the prophets of Baal, and was exhausted from the effort, and just wanted to lay down and die. The text tells us that he lay down under a tree and fell asleep. Then an angel touched him and told him to get up and eat. Then he fell asleep again. Then the

angel came and said something very interesting. "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." Perhaps we need to hear that message, that the journey is going to be too strenuous for us, unless we take the time to rest, and recharge our spiritual batteries.

You see, there is great wisdom in utilizing the tool of solitude, for when we take time to eat, and sleep, and rest, we give God the opportunity to speak to us. We see in the story of Elijah that God did speak to him. He was told to go out and stand on the mountain, and wait for the Lord to pass by. Then comes this wonderful passage about a great and powerful wind that tears the mountains apart and shatters the rocks, but God is not in the wind. Then there is a tremendous earthquake, but the Lord is not in the earthquake either. Then there comes a terrible fire, but the Lord is not in the fire. Then came a "gentle whisper", or "a sound of sheer silence", or "a low murmuring sound", or "a still, small voice", depending on which translation you read. The Hebrew is "a sound of a gentle stillness." However you translate it, that's how God revealed himself. We have to get quiet to hear God's still small voice.

One of the clear messages of this story is that Elijah would not have heard the voice of God if he had not been prepared. His time of solitude and

refreshment allowed him to be able to recognize God's voice. His use of the gift of solitude helped him be alone with his thoughts and fears, until he finally relaxed into the arms of God's love.

In the New Testament, we find many examples of Jesus utilizing the discipline of solitude to rest in God's love and receive strength for the journey. Consider the story of his temptation in the wilderness. How could he have faced the devil without first praying and fasting for 40 days? The night before he chose the 12 disciples, he spent the night alone, praying. When he learned about John the Baptist's death, he withdrew from the crowds in a boat, to a lonely place. After the wonderful miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, he went up into the hills by himself. As Jesus prepared to face the agony of the cross, he chose to go to a beautiful garden, and be alone and pray.

Jesus has given us an example to consider here. His was a full life if ever there was one. There were always sick people to heal, hungry people to feed, students to be taught. Yet he would get away frequently, and seek the blessedness of solitude.

What do you do to refresh your soul? How do you make use of the gift of solitude? Perhaps you take a walk in the woods, or enjoy a bubble bath, or you

make time to write in a journal, or you sit and watch the snow fall out your window for several quiet moments (as I'm doing right this moment, while writing this sermon). I would like you to turn to your neighbor, and share the times of solitude in your life, that bring you healing and energy. (allow several minutes for sharing).

My prayer is that we might embrace times of solitude, so that we can hear the still, small voice of God, and receive that sense of healing and peace that He so wishes to give to us. The last paragraph on the chapter on solitude in Richard Foster's book, "The Celebration of Discipline" says this: "Don't you feel a tug, a yearning to sink down into the silence and solitude of God? Don't you long for something more? Doesn't every breath crave a deeper, fuller exposure to his Presence? It is the Discipline of solitude that will open the door. You are welcome to come in and 'listen to God's speech in his wondrous, terrible, gentle, loving, all-embracing silence.'" Amen.