

Solitude Teaching 04:

Encounter With Our God

Intro hook:

- Last week, I got up early one morning and drove outside the city to a Norbertine monastery. It's up a windy road, in a beautiful canyon, there's no cell reception there, no urban noise at all — it is quiet.
- I was sitting in the chapel, and it was so quiet that when I would click my pen to write in my journal, I could hear it echo off the walls ...
- And I spent the day just sitting there, alone, with God ... listening...
- No phone or device, no books to read, no to-do list, no goals for the day; just my Bible and journal and an open heart.
- At first, my mind was jumpy and all over the place ... but as the hours passed, it began to calm ... and I began to sense the voice of God welling up in my heart.
- When the day was over, there were no fireworks in the sky, I was not caught up in the third heaven.
- But I drove back home at peace and with a sharper clarity around...
 - Who I am, who I'm not...
 - What I'm called to do and not do...
 - And mostly just a sense of how loved I am by God and how incredibly good my life in his world actually is.
- Now, most people would say I don't have the time to spend a day away.
- I live a busy life in LA. I'm raising three teenagers, I lead a nonprofit, I am always behind on my to-do list — and on my solitude day, I did not check a single thing off it.
- Most would consider my day a waste of time.

- In fact, Henri Nouwen called solitude “wasting time on God”. He didn’t mean solitude is a waste of time.
- He meant, in a culture devoted to the worship of the twin gods of accomplishment and accumulation, where pathological busyness is the norm, where people, even when they are alone, are never really alone, but tethered to their devices ... to spend a day just sitting in the quiet listening for God is considered a poor use of time.
- But to those who have discovered the raw power of just setting your soul before its maker ... it’s the best use of time you could possibly imagine.
- All the saints and sages of Christian history say in chorus: Solitude is a foundational practice for the spiritual life.
- I love this from Father Ammonas, one of the desert fathers. When a young man came to him for spiritual direction, he said:
 - “Behold, my beloved, I have shown you the power of silence, how thoroughly it heals and how fully pleasing it is to God ... it is by silence that the saints grew ... it was because of silence that the power of God dwelt in them, because of silence that the mysteries of God were known to them.”
- What Father Ammonas and so many others — ancient and modern — say is: No matter your personality or your stage of life, solitude, silence, and stillness hold a raw power for transformation that few other disciplines do.

Seam: *Because... in solitude... we encounter God ...*

Set up:

Over the last two sessions, we made the point that solitude is not “a private therapeutic place” — it is the place of encounter.

1. First, an encounter with our self
2. Second, an encounter with our enemy
3. And now we’re ready for the final and most important encounter of all — an encounter with our God

Turn: *Turn in your Bibles to Mark 1. Let’s read yet another story of Jesus in the eremos...*

Mark 1v32-39

- That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.
 - In context, Jesus is coming off a marathon day of teaching in the synagogue, healing the sick, casting out demons ... you would think he would sleep in the next morning, go out to brunch with Peter, James, and John, and recover over a nice pour over with avocado toast ...
 - But instead, verse 35 ...
- Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.
 - That phrase “solitary place” is eremos in Greek. While everyone else is sleeping, Jesus goes into solitude to pray ... 36 ...
- Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”
 - Notice, they have to go searching for Jesus! It’s like he’s hiding.
 - I would argue, learning to hide is an essential discipline of an apprentice of Jesus.
 - Because, look at what comes out of the quiet; next line ...
- Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else — to the nearby villages — so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.
 - Jesus is presented with an amazing opportunity to go back to Capernaum and ride the wave of popular opinion. There’s all sorts of social pressure on him, but notice, what does Jesus say?
 - “Let us go somewhere else ... so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”
 - That’s Jesus for “no.”
 - In this story, you see Jesus’ pattern of retreat and return ... He goes into solitude to encounter God, and then he comes back ...
 - And you see that he comes back with this heightened sense of clarity around his identity — his sense of self, who he is, and his calling, what he is meant to do next ...

Example:

- It comes as no surprise that Jesus used two verbs with his apprentices on a regular basis — “come” and “go.”
- Come away on retreat and then go back — or return to love and serve.
- It’s so important that we follow this pattern, because when we don’t come away, we lose our center, and our spiritual equilibrium ... But when we encounter God in solitude, like Jesus, we often emerge with a clearer vision of our identity and calling.

Seam: *A short word on each ...*

1. Identity

- By “identity,” I just mean who we experience ourselves to be.
- We all live from an identity, or a sense of self.
- But identity formation is unique in Christian spirituality because — very different than how identity is made in our postmodern culture — our identity as Christians isn’t something we choose, like what style of clothing we wear, or what car we drive, or what political party we “identify” with. It’s something we discover, we receive as a gift from God.
- It’s less architecture and more archeology; less something we make up and more something we unearth from the ground of our being in God.
- Much is said about the “true self” in our culture, but through a Christian lens, we don’t discover our true self by seeking it, but by seeking God.
- In seeking God, we encounter what Nouwen called “the inner voice of love” — the voice of God, speaking over our life exactly as we are, with all our flaws and failures.
- We realize all those things are true of us, but they are not the truest thing about us. The truest thing about us is that we are “in Christ,” in the language of the New Testament. We are seen, utterly as we are, no filter, no Photoshop, and yet we are enveloped by love, in love, for love.
- When we go into solitude, we encounter God’s love and hear his voice over our identity ...
- As a result, we get a little distance from other people and their voice over our identity — their love or hate, their praise or criticism, and all their opinions ... We realize we’re

not what other people say or think about us; and we get a little buffer between us and all the other voices ...

- And come away with a new clarity on who we are in God ...
- Our identity. Secondly, our ...

2. Calling

- When we encounter God's love, we then feel safe enough to surrender to God and his direction over our life.
- And then we are inevitably sent by God back out ...
- Thomas Merton once said, "We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them."
- The desert fathers and mothers used to say, "We retreat from the world, for the world."
- And we come back with a new clarity of purpose around our calling ...
 - This is what I'm meant to do, and not do.
 - This is what I'm meant to give my time to, and not to.
 - This is what I'm meant to give my best energies to, and not to ...
- So that we can say yes to God's call on our life, but also so we can say no to all the other calls on our life.
- It's been said that the opposite of contemplation isn't action, it's reaction. It's a ping-pong life that is in slavery to the tyranny of the urgent, not the important. To other people and not to God.
- The goal is to go into solitude and then come back out, like Jesus, who, when presented with an amazing opportunity and with pressure from the disciples, said, No. That's not who I am or what I'm supposed to do next.
- Identity, and calling.

Hinge 1: *This is why we need solitude more now than ever.*

- I grieve when I hear modern Christians write off solitude because they are extroverted or

have young kids or a busy job or just don't like it, or even pastors who tell me they are too busy with ministry ...

- If Jesus needed this practice, how much more do we!
- Jesus spent so much time in solitude ...
- And yet: Jesus was no hermit. He would always come back. But not until after an encounter with God.
- Ultimately, we do not go into the eremos to encounter ourselves and our pain ... as important as it is to make space for our feelings to come up and come to an emotional homeostasis ...
- Nor do we go into the desert to encounter the evil one and get free of his voice ...
- Ultimately, we go into the eremos to encounter God — to hear his voice, speak over us our identity and calling...

Hinge 2: *But this, this is why we need to learn, not just to go away; we need to learn to wait on God and listen for his voice.*

Listening:

- The French intellectual Simone Weil once said, "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life."
- That was her summary of all of it. Waiting patiently in expectation.
- This process of encounter often takes way longer than we prefer.
 - We've been so formed by our culture of speed — 5G and WiFi and order on Amazon and it's on your door a few hours later — but the spiritual life has its own pace, and it's slow ...
- Much of it is spent waiting and listening ...
- Jesus regularly said, "If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear." Let them listen.
- Listening is at the heart of all true Christian spirituality.
- Ruth Barton, in our recommended reading, writes this:
 - "One of the basic assumptions of the Christian life is that God does communicate with us through the Holy Spirit. The rhythm of speaking and listening we call

communication is at the heart of any real relationship — including our relationship with God. ... The capacity to recognize the voice of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit arises out of friendship with God that is sustained through prayer, silent listening and attentiveness to all that is going on outside us, inside us, and between us and God. Through practice and experience we become familiar with the tone of God's voice, the content of his communications with us and his unique way of addressing us. We learn to recognize God's voice just as we recognize the voice of a loved one on the other end of the phone."

- You may be new to following Jesus and learning to hear God's voice for the first time, or you may have been a Christian for many years, but if listening prayer is new to you, it's very simple
 - Our friend Dr. Aila Tasse from Kenya says there are three keys to listening prayer:
 - "There's so much going in our minds [she says], and we are distracted so much, so you need a quiet place, quiet time, and a quiet heart."
1. Quiet place — find a distraction-free zone.
 2. Quiet time — one of the best catchphrases to ever come out of the evangelical tradition.
 3. And a quiet heart — our heart is full of noise! An hour spent in silence may be the noisiest hour of your life! All sorts of distractions come up. You let them come, but then you let them go ... you still your mind before God ...
- Then, you just open your mind to God ...
 - In biblical theology, your body, including your mind, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, the dwelling place of God. Meaning, the Holy Spirit is inside you; he has direct access to your consciousness — to the flow of thoughts and feelings and perceptions and images that pass through your mind's eye all day long.
 - And just like a friend sitting next to you at a coffee shop or a co-worker in an open-plan office, he can interrupt you and inject his thoughts into your thoughts, his feelings into your feelings ...
 - This is why God doesn't have to speak audibly. He doesn't need to; speech is guided thought. When you speak to someone, you guide their mind into your thoughts; God can reach directly into our mind and guide our thoughts.
 - So when we go into solitude, we spend most of the time just listening ...

- We listen to Scripture — whether we open our Bible and read chapters and chapters at a time, or just read one passage slowly and prayerfully, or just meditate on whatever Scriptures God brings to mind ...
- We listen to the circumstances of our life — searching for God’s hand of providence in the unfolding of our story ... asking the question, Where is God in the events of my life? And what is God trying to draw out of me in this season?
- We listen to the quiet whisperings of our heart — trusting that God’s Spirit is often at work, desiring through our desires. In fact, this is one of the reasons solitude is so important; we often don’t know what we desire, not truly. Therefore, we don’t know God’s intention for us. In solitude, we get in touch with that deep desire of the Spirit of God in the holy of holies that is our inner heart.
- And we listen to the thoughts that come into our mind from God himself ...
- We have to listen carefully because God’s voice is often so quiet and gentle ...
- In the story of Elijah’s time in solitude in 1 Kings 19, there’s that famous line about how God’s voice was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in “the still, small voice.” Another way to translate the Hebrew is “the sound of gentle silence.”
- So many of us have found God’s voice to be like a whisper in the heart.
- This is why the quiet is the best medium for hearing God’s voice, and it’s why learning to discern God’s voice from all the other voices — within and without — is the task of a lifetime. It’s a skill you must develop as a follower of Jesus, and it can be done, not just by monks and nuns, but by people like you and me. It’s just like learning to hear any other voice.
- Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd and said his “sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.” (John 10v3-4)
- If I were sitting at a coffee shop and my dad were to walk in behind me and start talking, my brain would immediately recognize his voice and turn around, “Dad!” Because I’ve grown up listening to my father. I’d know his voice anywhere.
- In the same way, as we spend time with our heavenly Father, we come to recognize his voice from all the other voices in the world.

Seam: *How? Just by waiting patiently in the quiet and listening ...*

Basic:

- This is the crux of discipleship to Jesus ...
- And there are some things that can only happen in solitude, and nowhere else.
- As Dallas Willard once said:
 - “You rarely find any person who has made great progress in the spiritual life who did not at some point have much time in solitude and silence.”

But remember: solitude is a place and a practice...

1. It's a place

- It may be out in the desert or the wilderness as it was for Jesus.
- Do not underestimate the power of being alone with God in the beauty of his creation.
- Every single example of Jesus in solitude, he's outdoors, mostly in wild places ...
- A spiritual discipline is any activity you see regularly in the life of Jesus. I believe walking or being alone in creation is one of the most overlooked of all the spiritual disciplines, and one of the most powerful.
- So, the place may be the outdoors or, like me, you may live in a city and not have time to do that a lot, or you may not be able, that's okay. In Jesus' teaching on prayer he said, “Go into your inner room, close the door, and there pray to your Father who is unseen ...” He was referring to a room in the typical first century home that was essentially a storeroom for food and other dry goods — no windows, no light, just a small closet really. This is where we get the language of a “prayer closet.” You may not have time to go hiking in a national park, but you likely have a closet you can hide in and there be with God ...
- The eremos is a place, but ...

2. It's also a practice

- You can do this for days at a time, on retreat as many of you are doing this coming week, or, like Jesus in Mark 1, just get up early and sit in your backyard and pray ...

Seam: *And our invitation to you is not just to experiment with solitude for a few weeks, but to incorporate this practice into your Rule of Life. By which I mean, to incorporate it into your life architecture of apprenticeship to Jesus.*

Rule of Life:

- To find a daily place for solitude, even if it's just ten minutes when you wake up or before you go to bed ...
- To find a weekly place for solitude ... maybe you spend a longer chunk of time in the quiet on your Sabbath or day off ...
- To find a monthly or seasonal place for solitude to discover the practice of retreat ...
- But also, to begin to “de-noise” all of your life ...
- One of the first things you learn in solitude is that to really hear God's voice in the quiet, many of us need to lower the volume in our overall life.
- The Apostle Paul said to the Thessalonians, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life.”
- Most of us live a noisy life in a noisy world.
- But many people find that as they follow Jesus over time, they begin to listen to less podcasts, less music, watch less TV, listen to less radio when they drive ... that stuff isn't bad per se, though much of it is like the ambient noise of a godless world ... a world trying to distract itself from the emptiness within ...
- But that stuff isn't bad at all. But many of us find we just desire to spend more and more time listening ...
- You will likely find this as you follow Jesus ... you crave quiet more and more because you crave God ...

Ending:

- There are seasons to life, and sometimes we need more solitude in our Rule of Life, other times the call of love is to be more present to people in need.
- But in all seasons, we come to see the truth of what St. John of the Cross once said:
 - “Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God ... for the only language he

hears is the silent language of love.”

- He said this in the 16th century! Hundreds of years before the digital, urban, world of noise we live in today.
- To repeat what I said in session 1: We are the first generation to follow Jesus with a smartphone in our pocket, the first people to sort out how to pray in the digital age. How to hear God’s voice when every time we open our phone a thousand other voices scream at us — other identities and other callings, not our true identity and true calling.
- Future generations will look back on us: What will they say?
- Will we be a generation whose faith was sucked into the black hole of the digital age?
- Or will we stand together against the gravitational pull and go into the quiet to encounter God?
- Ultimately, our spiritual future hangs in the balance.
- Remember that line from Ruth Barton: The invitation to solitude is “an invitation to enter more deeply into the intimacy of relationship with the One who waits just outside the noise and busyness of our lives.”
- God is waiting for you outside the noise ... the crowds of people ... the hurry of city life ... and all the distractions of our time.
- I did not say this earlier, but, when I sat down in the chapel at that monastery and it was so quiet I could hear a hum in my inner ear ... I felt enveloped by God. There was no emotional high, it was gentle, but I felt surrounded by God’s presence and permeated by his love.
- There are few things, if any, more wonderful this side of resurrection.
- Do you desire to encounter God? Then say yes to Jesus’ invitation to solitude, silence, and stillness, and follow him into the quiet.