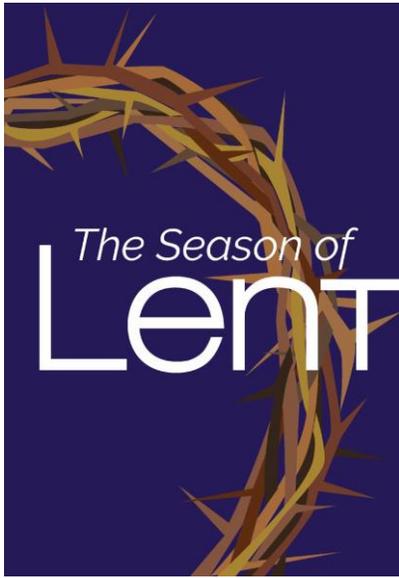


LENT 3



On this third week of Lent, perhaps you are ready to move into a third spiritual discipline, if not keep practicing the previous two. This next one has proven difficult for many Christians — Solitude.

There are times for each of us, I imagine, when we are alone for short or extended periods of time. Often, however, those times are temporarily endured, rather than sought out. We put up with 'having to be alone'. We find ways of 'keeping busy' so that whatever time we have to be by ourselves will go more quickly - and less painfully. Solitude, like silence, which we will be looking at another time, is a spiritual discipline for very good reason. It is time which we set aside to take ourselves 'aside' and out of the rush of all the usual activities we must or choose to be involved in, on any given day.

In solitude, says Henri Nouwen, "we can listen to the voice of him who spoke to us before we could speak a word, who healed us before we could make any gesture of help, who set us free long before we could free others, and who loved us long before we could give love to anyone...In solitude, we discover that our life is not a possession to be defended, but a gift to be shared."

Our life is a gift to be shared. Too often, without taking time to 'go away by ourselves', we can lose ourselves, and lose the gift God created us to be, for others, and lose our ability to bless those within our communities.

The 15th Century, Bishop of Utrecht (Netherlands), Thomas A Kempis, wrote, that "We must imitate Christ's life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do." How true. Jesus reminded his followers that they needed time apart from other influences, demands and pressures, to retain their focus on the Kingdom of God. A small portion from a prayer of Thomas A Kempis, is as follows — "You the only object of my love, the centre and supreme happiness of my soul! Come and impress my mind with such a lively conviction of Thy presence that all within me may yield to its influence. Amen."

The presence, provision and power of God can only be kept "centre of mind" if we clear out the clutter of other thoughts that crowd God out. Morton Kelsey, in his book, *Adventures Inward*, confesses, "As long as my mind is raging with thoughts, ideas, plans, and fears, I cannot listen significantly to God or any other dimension of reality." There is a commotion to life that we have gotten used to, and perhaps even invite at times. "I am so busy these days" is a phrase we hear, and use too often. It attempts to lift, as though a virtue, a busy life, rather than a blessed one.

If we need any further encouragement to look after our soul, through the practice of solitude, there is this warning given by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book, *Life Together*,

“Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will only do harm to himself and to the community.”

There is a danger to avoiding solitude. There are blessings attached to the spiritual practice of “coming away by ourselves” to be with God. Our ability to listen for “the still, small voice” increases; the quality of our prayer life improves; we gain a certain amount of energy from renewing our soul in the company of Christ; we get better at closing out unnecessary distractions; we increase our hunger and thirst for justice and mercy, and have the added will to act upon newfound convictions of the Spirit.

No doubt, Annie Hawks, the author of the hymn, “*I Need Thee Every Hour*”, understood the benefits of the spiritual discipline of solitude. May the words of this hymn be our prayer today.

“I need thee every hour
most gracious Lord;
no tender voice like thine
can peace afford.
I need thee, O I need thee;
every hour I need thee!
O bless me now, my Saviour,
I come to thee.”

Spend some time this week, alone with God, experiencing the Living Word through the passages here:

Luke 5:12-16 Exodus 33:1-14 Matthew 4:1-11 Ecclesiastes 3:1-14
Galatians 1:11-24 Psalm 37:1-7 Matthew 26:1-13