

UNDER THE SOLITARY BROOM TREE

Life in the “Grey Zone”

Matt Bruns

Read 1 Kings 19:1-15a; 19

The last two years of so much upheaval and rapid change on our lives and world that have left us in what pastor Mark Sayers calls the “grey zone.”

It’s going to require us finding a whole new way of being if we are going to have any lasting or significant impact as we navigate the many crises unfolding around us. A few weeks ago, I had the rare chance to go away for two days by myself at long bay. I needed to catch my breath after an intense season in ministry and family life juggle and recover after having Covid.

As I drove out there, I was distracted. I was twitchy. I was preoccupied. Could I go away and leave everything to my wife when she was just as fatigued as me? Can I really afford to take this time off? What if I get bored, panicky or can’t sleep? And under the surface there were some more confronting questions lurking. Will I be able to switch off and leave my phone and messages alone? What will I really find if I do actually stop? How will I really feel about facing myself with some of the distraction removed? In the quiet what if it turns out that there’s very little between me and God?

In our reading Elijah is fleeing from Jezebels contract on his life. His heroic success on mount Carmel defeating the prophets of Baal seems to count for nothing now that he is alone with himself, on the run and hiding.

Whether you have been driven into solitude like Elijah or whether you have entered more willingly, you may be surprised by what else happens when you get there, because under those questions will most likely be emotions: frustrations or anger about past pains or disappointments, resentments, grief or sadness, or the exhaustion that comes with constant noise and distraction.

Elijah must reckon with his exhaustion, depletion, sense of failure, depression and fatigue. His wilderness experience is a powerful image for the emptiness all of us must walk through on the way to encounter with God in new and deeper ways. The experience is often so confronting that we will do almost anything to avoid it. Whether it is desperation or desire that has driven us in to the wilderness, this willingness to see ourselves and name it in God’s presence is at the very heart of the life of faith.

The good news is that God started with what Elijah needed most: sleep, food and

drink, he attended to his physical condition. Rather than being a source of shame and discouragement, your sleepiness or lack of motivation for the journey into solitude may be a symptom of low-level exhaustion. Elijah's story invites us to stop fighting our weariness or fatigue and surrender to it in God's presence.

And when God does make himself known he shows up with an important question – “what are you doing here Elijah?” It's a question inviting an honest conversation of where Elijah is really at. The good the bad and the ugly. It's best to let the truth come out and whether it is desperation or desire that has driven us in to the wilderness, this willingness to see ourselves and name it in God's presence is at the very heart of the life of faith.

QUESTION

Does desire or desperation more accurately describe where you are with your relationship with God? Or is there another word? Discuss with someone in your group your answer to this question.

QUOTE

Ruth Hayley Barton in her book *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* (the book I used as to guide me during my retreat) says this “The invitation to solitude and silence is just that. It 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. It is an invitation to communion and communion with the One who is always present even when our awareness has been dulled by distraction. It is an invitation to the adventure of spiritual transformation in the deepest places of our being, an adventure that will result in greater freedom and authenticity and surrender to God than we have yet experienced.”

She goes to argue that silence and solitude is the most challenging, the most needed and the least experienced spiritual discipline among evangelical Christians today and that we are starved for 4 things:

1. We are starved for mystery, to know this God as One who is totally Other and to experience reverence in his presence.
2. We are starved for intimacy, to see and feel and know God in the very cells of our being.
3. We are starved for rest, to know God beyond what we can do for him.
4. We are starved for quiet, to hear the sound of sheer silence that is the presence of God himself.

PRACTICE

So, in light of all that the most important thing is to do it. But a few helpful tips to establish a sacred space:

1. Identify your sacred space and time.
2. Begin with a modest goal especially if this is new (5-10 minutes).
3. Settle into a comfortable yet alert position (an upright chair is good).
4. Ask God to give you a simple prayer that expresses your openness and desire for God (no more than 6-8 syllables so that it can be prayed naturally in the rhythm of your breathing (e.g. - come Holy Spirit, Lord here I am, Jesus fill me with your love and life). Pray this prayer several times as a way of entering into silence and to help deal with distractions that will pop into your mind. Just notice them and let them go by.
5. Take several deep breaths as a way of settling into these moments and becoming aware of God's presence with you.
6. When you feel ready - hear God ask you the question he asked Elijah - what are you doing here? Sit quietly with the question, let it sink in. It might be serious & weighty, but it might not. Let it be enough today what is true about where you are at and then just wait in God's presence. Whatever's going on in the silence just stay with it without trying to run from it.
7. Keep still and quiet enough for another minute or two. Is there any self-awareness that has come to you in answering this question? Is there any area where God is highlighting your need to be transformed?
8. Then pray a short, simple, honest prayer and close your time in silence with a prayer of gratitude for God's presence being with you.
9. Resist the urge to judge yourself or your experiences in silence as it's about being with God in whatever state you are in.

That's the challenge and the opportunity I believe is before us in this grey zone. We can say yes, or no. God extends the invitation, but waits for us to respond from the depths of our desire or desperation. Will we say yes?