

Several weeks ago I sent all of you a giving letter that said 2020/2021 was going to be a year we pressed on to live out the mission and fulfill the vision God has given to us. But there's a problem...in what will be the understatement of the century, life is hard, and it wants to knock us off course. In normal times we have trials related to health, finances, relationships, employment, but 2020 has taken it to a different level. Covid pandemic, division in our land, economic uncertainty, and not just one but two Saharan dust clouds have all added to the instability of life and the potential for us to just throw up our hands and quit. The internet's meme game has even caught on. Here's one that expresses what we are experiencing.

You know who else had a hard life? Jesus. He lived during political unrest, had little economic means, and had to deal personally with rejection, conspiracy, and the temptation of acclaim. Yet, at the end of his life, just before he went to the Cross, he was able to pray **[John 17:4] "4 I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do."**

How did he do that? That's what we want to answer in this series called *Revived*. We are going to look at the practices and rhythms Jesus used to be revived and keep going when the challenges and trials of life tried to knock him off course. I'm not talking about spiritual revival in the sense that he was far from God and had to return. I'm talking about the kind of refreshing all humans need, even the one who was fully God and fully man. As Hebrews says, he experienced all the ups and downs we experience; fatigue, disappointment, grief, temptation, yet he mastered the behaviors of life that revived him and allowed him to press on.

This morning, we begin with one that will come as no surprise because it is foundational and essential, both for Jesus and for us. In fact, theologian Henry Nouwen says "Without (this practice), it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life", and without a spiritual life, you and I will find it impossible to live out our God-given purpose in Christ. It is the practice of silence and solitude, the practice where we quiet ourselves internally, get away from the noise and distractions externally, and sequester ourselves with God. Solitude is not being alone, but being alone with God, to know him more, know ourselves more, and let him work in our lives.

Silence and solitude was so essential to the life and ministry of Jesus that the Gospels record him doing it nearly 20 times, including nine references in Luke, one of which spoke of its frequency: **[Luke 5:16] He would withdraw to desolate places and pray.** We might ask "Why did he need to do it? He's Jesus." The answer is that he couldn't not do it because he needed to be with his Father, and it was essential to him fulfilling his mission. Jesus knew something we all must learn: **The key to accomplishing everything God has for us is regularly doing nothing in order to be with him.** And what we see in the life of Jesus is evidence of four blessings and outcomes of this practice.

Silence and solitude create space for relationship.

This is where it all begins and is the primary reason for this practice.

[Luke 5:15-16] ¹⁵ But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. ¹⁶ But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

From the very beginning of his ministry, as his notoriety grew and more and more people wanted a piece of him, Jesus insisted on regular time with his Father. In fact, the busier he got, the more it seems he would do this. If I asked you who is the greatest lover of God in the Bible, you might say Moses or David or Paul...or, you may give the Sunday school answer of Jesus, and this time you'd be right. Jesus had an unending desire to be with his Father and to commune with him. In fact, Jesus only identifies himself in relation to the Father. He knew who he was, and that propelled him forward. "The Father and I are one." "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." "I glorify the Father and the Father glorifies me." Those are words of intimacy, unity, and identity. Jesus simply wanted to be with the person he loves.

A few years ago I returned to my alma mater, Benedictine College, for an alumni weekend. Much of the faculty is made up Benedictine monks and the Sisters of Saint Scholastica, and those sisters hosted a luncheon for us one day. My former roommate and I ate with one of our English professors and we had a wonderful time. At the end of lunch, she invited us back any time for lunch, with one exception. "You can't come on the first Saturday of the month, because that's when I spend all day with my Jesus." It was one of the most compelling things I've ever heard anyone say because it was full of desire, anticipation, joy, and inflexibility. She wanted to be with her Jesus, and everything else came second to that.

The ingredients of intimacy are space, time, and focus. If you want any relationship to grow, it requires that you give it those three things. Without that kind of devotion, it will remain stagnant at best or wither at worst. If Martha and I just gave each other our leftovers or drive-by hellos, our relationship would suffer. And it's the same way with our relationship with the Lord. Jesus said, "Abide in me and I in you." That's a statement of intimacy. Silence and solitude is a time to come before the Lord, abide in Christ, know God more and ourselves more, and rest in who we really are. There's a retreat center that has a sign that says "Welcome to this place of solitude. Feel free to take off your masks." This practice allows us to commune with God and be our true selves because he accepts us, receives us, and loves us just as we are. And it is out of this loving relationship that our entire lives flow. It starts here for Jesus, and it starts here for us.

Silence and solitude create space for refinement.

All three Synoptic Gospels tell of two back-to-back episodes in Jesus' life, his baptism and his testing in the wilderness, that show us the way we can be changed in these times of solitude.

[Luke 4:1-2] And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness 2 for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry.

After Jesus is baptized, the Spirit leads him into the wilderness for a time of silence and solitude, but this episode is to refine him and increase his dependence on the Father. He spends 40 days fasting and praying. He has eliminated all other influences and provision in his life, he is going without in order to be sustained by the Father alone. After 40 days, when you'd think he is at his weakest (and he is physically), he is at his strongest spiritually because he has learned to completely depend on God. So, when the devil arrives to tempt him, he is able to resist. He was refined in this test, and Jesus returned from the wilderness in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is one of the most difficult, but most beneficial, aspects of this practice. Several years ago I felt led to get away for a few days to fast and pray. Now, it's work for me to sit still and silent for a short period of time, so this idea of doing this over a few days was a real challenge. I have some friends who were generous enough to let me use their lake house and, upon arriving, I tried to get quiet before the Lord to hear from him. But it just wasn't happening. I couldn't focus, I couldn't sit still. In fact, I paced around every square inch of that house, not because I was being nosy, but because I was stirred up. And towards the end of the first day, I thought "It's like there's a battle going on for my soul." And then the light bulb went off, and I said "Oh yeah, Luke 4. There probably is a battle going on for my soul." The devil is no fool. He knows the spiritual growth that can occur in times like this. That recognition caused me to lean into God more, to confess my total dependence on him, and to ask for him to sustain and fulfill me in this time of lack and this time of spiritual attack. And he did. There was a point at which the struggle was over and my interaction with God was easy. The rest of my time was intimate, productive, and I left with an energy and enthusiasm, a power, I had not experienced in a while.

There may not be a greater challenge to Americans than telling them to go without...to leave behind their stuff, their noise, their engagement, their food, their schedules, and to let God be all they have and become all they need. If it sounds hard, it's because it is. It's easy to say "Sure, God is all I need." But to put into practice is a much different thing. But there is a spiritual payoff that more of us need to experience, that time where you leave everything behind, where God really is all you have, and you let him show you that he is all you need. He will fill and satisfy your soul. When you allow him to do that, he becomes primary, the rest becomes secondary, and you begin to operate in your life by his power, not your own.

Silence and solitude create space for renewal.

If life is hard and you are pouring yourself out for the Lord, you're going to get tired, physically and spiritually. It was true for Jesus and it's true for us. God will let us get there, but it's not a place he wants us to stay. When we are exhausted, silence and solitude is where we go to be renewed. Jesus shows us this practice after he fed the 5,000.

[Matthew 14:22-23] 22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.

Jesus had been pouring himself out in his ministry and had just performed the miracle of feeding 5,000 men and their families from five loaves and two fish. Because Jesus subjected himself to the limitations of humanity, he would fatigue. His instinct upon exhaustion was to run to the Father in silence and solitude, allow him to restore him, and give him the strength to keep going in his ministry. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus would engage in ministry, disengage to be restored, and reengage with renewed energy. It is a practice Jesus not only modeled, but one he insists upon for his followers. After sending out the twelve to preach repentance and heal:

[Mark 6:30-31] 30 The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

After an exhausting season of ministry, Jesus called his disciples to a time of rest. It was not a time to just go crash or escape, it was time away to be with him and allow him to renew them. Few of my recent sermons have received as much feedback as the one on Sabbath rest during our *A New Normal* series. We all know we are overcommitted, and exhaustion is what follows. And when we are exhausted, our capacity and impact for the Lord diminishes, our attitudes change, we become more susceptible to sin and shortcuts, and joy is hard to come by. That's why Jesus says to come to him if we are weary or heavy laden because he will give us rest. Like the body needs sleep, our soul needs the rest, a rest found only in Jesus, and a rest that keeps us going.

Silence and solitude create space for revelation.

In times of significant decisions and a need for clarity, Jesus got away to hear from the Father.

[Luke 6:12-13] 12 In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. 13 And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is constantly saying things like he only says what he has heard from the Father, he only does what he sees the Father doing. His is completely submitted to the Father, fully evidenced by when he asked for the cup to be taken from him and followed it with "not my will but your will be done." The Father's will was made clear, and Jesus faithfully made his way to the cross. In this passage, Jesus spends an entire night alone in prayer to seek the Father's will about whom should be his apostles, those who would travel with him and first be sent out to do his work. He would later refer to these twelve as those the Father gave him.

In 2012, I got away at a men's retreat to really pursue the Lord about what to do with my life. The retreat included an entire afternoon by yourself to pursue the Lord and allow him to speak to you. Similar to the other experience I mentioned, this one also got off to a rough start. We were at Pine Cove, so I was just wandering the grounds and, at one point, while sitting, one of their horses came up to me and I started talking to it. I was literally talking to a horse when I was trying to hear from God. That's how bad it got! But eventually, when I had literally walked to three other campgrounds there on the campus, I finally began to hear from God. I had gotten quiet enough and still enough to be able to hear from him, and the outcome of that time ultimately led to the decision to go into vocational ministry. I gave the space, time, and focus for God to speak to me, and from that came the revelation of his will.

This is the last of the four because this is the fruit of the other three. The more intimate our relationship with God, the more he refines us and makes us more dependent upon him, and the more we rest in him, the more we'll be able to discern his will for our lives. Moments like these are not always mountaintop experiences, but they are opportunities to hear from the Lord and receive his direction. Two of the most helpful questions we can ask anyone, even though they may sound trite, are "Have you prayed about it?" and "What does God have to say about it?" Many of us are having to make big decisions right now. The global pandemic has impacted almost every aspect of our lives. It's changed the way we do church, it's changed the way we do relationship, it's had huge economic impact for our nation and for many of us individually. I know several of you have lost jobs or been impacted negatively. All of those things require us to

make decisions, but none of us are alone in those decisions. God wants to speak into them. He loves you, he is the called the Counselor for a reason, he promises to give wisdom in abundance, and his will is perfect. The pressure to get it right can make us quit. Thankfully we don't have to figure it all out on our own. Get quiet and listen to what God has to say.

Determine your need. Which of these are you lacking? Relationship, refinement, renewal, revelation? We all need to grow in our relationship with God. It is ongoing, and we are either moving towards God or away from him. Apart from him all the rest falls apart. Are you wanting to grow spiritually? Are you exhausted? Do you need guidance on the next step in your life? God wants to meet you in those needs. Declare your need this week to him and ask him to help you in it. This is where we all need to begin.

Develop your plan. Some of you just got deflated. You hear the word "plan" and immediately think you've got to lay out some intricate map that has you praying every day for the rest of your life. Some of you felt discouragement and guilt well up inside of you because you've tried to make it part of your life before and it didn't stick. Others of you are simply overwhelmed by the idea of adding anything. I want to try to set you free of that this morning, because I often discover a common theme when I talk to someone who struggles with this practice. They often don't see or understand the purpose of it and think the activity of prayer is the end in and of itself. But notice one of those r-words I didn't use was "ritual". Ritual says, "You have to pray because that's what Christians are supposed to do", and we become legalistic about it. But Jesus says and models that prayer is a blessing because it leads to relationship, refinement, rest, and revelation. How would our prayer lives change if we understood and pursued silence and solitude because we know it resulted in that? Perhaps what you need more than anything else is a change of perspective and expanded possibilities.

Some practical ideas: If you aren't sure how to pray, pray a Psalm, read a book on prayer like Richard Foster's *Prayer*, ask a mature believer to teach you and pray with you. Those of you with a rich prayer life have an incredible discipleship opportunity here. I have often typed prayers as a way to help me stay focused. Minute retreats: I heard of a Christian radio station that would have sixty seconds of dead airtime remind you to spend a minute in silence with the Lord. Schedule and keep this time. The mother of Charles Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had a bunch of kids and would pull her apron over her head as her place of solitude and to let her kids know she was spending time with God. Parents, I get this is a unique time. Take shifts. Single parents, God's grace is sufficient, he will meet you in your life stage. Life Groups, this could be a wonderful place to minister to one another by helping parents get time alone with God. Regardless, start somewhere and be intentional.

Don't lose hope. God wants this for us. He wants to be with us, he wants you to know him, he wants to pour himself out into and through your life, and because this is so foundational to the Christian life, he will help you make it happen. When you pursue this in faith, it will please God. And I'm confident that, by his grace, duty becomes discipline, discipline becomes desire, and desire becomes delight. And as you delight in the Lord, when the trials and challenges of life come, he will keep you going, just like he kept Jesus going.