

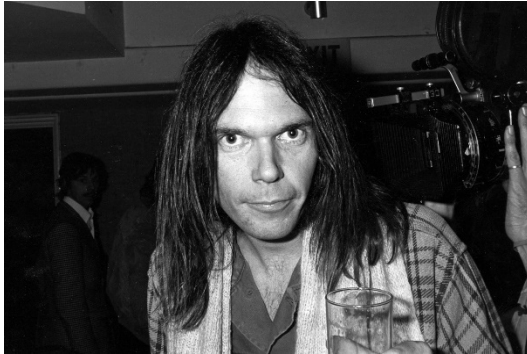
Questions You Can't Answer Yourself, Pt. 1

Are We Ultimately Alone?

Psalm 139: 17-18; John 1: 14; John 14: 15-17

**First Presbyterian Church
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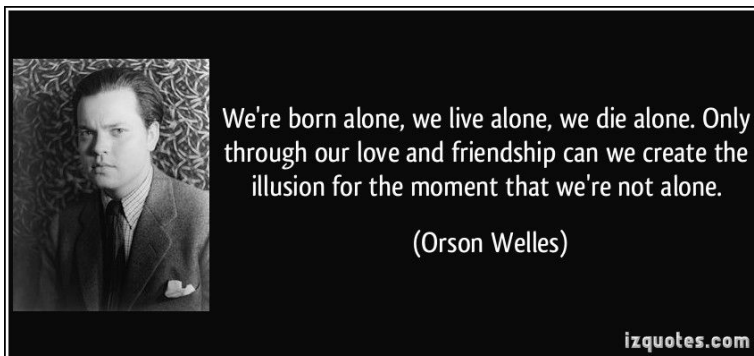


I don't want to like Neil Young! But still I do. He's the fourth member of the famous band, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. I'm pretty sure we'd never vote the same way. Was never real pleased with Neil's Canadian take on our southland. Lynyrd Skynyrd nailed it when they sang "I hope old Neil will remember, southern man don't need him round anyhow." It's just that so many of

Neil's songs are part of the soundtrack of my life, and, darn it, they're really good! Since junior high, I've been pondering the words to his song "Old Man Take a Look at My Life." Remember these:

I've been first and last,
Look at how the times goes past
But I'm all alone at last
Rolling home to you.

Neil was just 24 when he wrote the song. Now he's the old man. I wonder if he thinks about his comparison between the young and the old when he sings, "But I'm all alone at last." Does he still think that's true? Do *you* think that's true? That in the end, we are all alone. It's just us. Our thoughts locked in our brains. No one can really know us. No one can really feel what we're feeling. We're stuck in these bodies and even someone we're touching can't really find the *us* inside us.



Orson Welles became famous for his War of the Worlds radio hoax (1938), during which he convinced much of America that we really were being attacked by aliens. Welles directed the classic film *Citizen Kane* and starred

in many roles. He's also known for this poignant quote. We're ultimately alone. Connecting with someone we love just gives us the illusion for a brief time that we are not alone. That's some stark isolation.

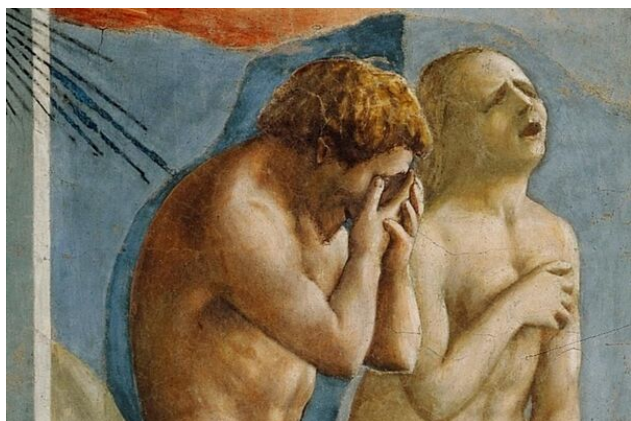


One of LSU's most famous professors was Robert Penn Warren. He won the Pulitzer Prize for *All the King's Men* and was poet laureate of the nation. Warren often wrote about our existential loneliness. In one poem, he considers what it's like to lie in bed next to the one you love yet still feel lost and alone:

That night you will lie in your bed, not alone—
But alone. In dark paradox you lie
And think of the screaming gleam of the world
In which you have passed alone, lost—and
In dark, lost, lain, hearing frailty of breath beside.¹

Have you ever laid awake hearing a loved one breathing next to you, a pet, a child, a spouse, and yet felt totally alone?

It's a common place now to note that we are the most device-connected people ever, and yet there is an epidemic of loneliness. Social media keeps us up with each other, but yet somehow also isolates us. We're missing real connection more than ever. That's a truth everyone realizes these days.



But it's not a new idea. In fact it goes all the way back to the beginning of our human story. Just look at this painting based on Genesis 3, painted by Masaccio in 1425. See the anguish on the faces of our first parents as they are expelled from the Garden of Eden. They lost paradise. But more, they lost intimacy. They lost the connection. Once they were naked and not

ashamed—nothing was between them. After the fall, enmity came between them. They could no longer understand each other; no longer say what they meant to say; no longer say what they mean to each other. And even worse, they were lonely for God. Once they walked with him in the Garden. Now they could not see him. C.S.

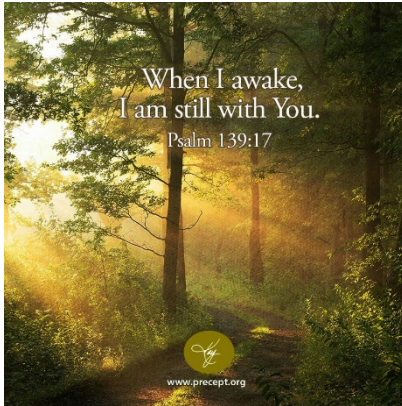
Lewis called it the inconsolable wound. Lonely for the God who made us and pining for each other, we make our way in a forbidding and fallen world. In a thousand, thousand ways, our poets, songwriters, and artists keep telling this story of aloneness. It's a problem we cannot solve by ourselves. A question we cannot answer.

A few weeks ago, I had a brief but extraordinary conversation with a neighbor in North Carolina, a guy who's becoming a good friend. We were talking about, of all things, electric bikes. He noted how easily the boost of the bike helped him pedal up long, winding roads in New England. I just asked why he was in that part of the country. He told me he had gone for a service for his father who had passed away some weeks earlier. He didn't hesitate to go to that deeper discussion. "You know," he said, "It's funny. They say we're born alone and we die alone. I could really see how you don't bring anything into the world and you don't take anything out of the world. None of your stuff goes with you. You have to go into death with nothing, You're just alone...Do you think that's true?"

In a flash a myriad of thoughts went through my mind: do I go for it? Do I really answer him? Do I wish I hadn't had that glass of wine? I said, "I totally feel what you're saying. It can feel like no one really knows what we're feeling. No one can hear our thoughts. It's all happening inside our skulls and some of it no one can share. I feel that aloneness sometimes. But also my faith as a Christian gives something else to me. Jesus gives me his Spirit. His life is inside mine. So I find that I am *companioned* at the deepest level. It seems to hold most true when things are most difficult. I feel like there's someone there with me."

That settled for a few seconds, and I wasn't sure where to go next. But Rhonda's sister was there and said brightly, "It's like my favorite part of the book *Pilgrim's Progress*, where Christian has to cross the river of death. He hears people on the other side calling to him. He has to step into the river alone and start wading, but then Jesus comes to him and carries him across to where everyone is waiting. It's so encouraging." All too soon the comings and goings of the party swept along the conversation to another place, but the moment of just saying out the truth of our hope seemed significant.

What's the basis for such a hope? Is it reasonable? Do we actually have an answer for our existential aloneness? Let's take the second half of this message to look together at our morning Scriptures. First, in beautiful Psalm 139, David prayed:



How precious to me
are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I would count them,
they are more than the sand.

I awake, and I am still with you.

We have lost Eden, lost face to face contact with our Creator. But our Creator God has not stopped thinking of us. He continues to uphold us with his attention. In fact, it is the very gaze of steadfast faithfulness that holds each life and the whole world together. David realized that he was not alone. The LORD I AM thought of him continually. God's regard for him was a precious treasure. Even when he sank deep into sleep, contact was not lost. When we sleep, we lose conscious control. We go deep into ourselves. We go away from the daylight world. But what David discovered is that even in unconsciousness, God was still thinking of him, and upholding his life. Then, this extraordinary line: I awake and I am still with you. I've been connected all along. I am with you. You are with me.



As a young theologian in the 1960's, with existentialism and the "Death of God" movement rising in popularity, Joseph Ratzinger realized the significance of Psalm 139. He uncovered the idea that Descartes' famous formula was wrong. Remember learning this: *I think therefore I am*. My existence is generated by my own thought about it. I'm the center and the determiner. *I am the subject*. That also makes me starkly alone. Ratzinger realized the different answer Christianity has. By changing one letter in the Descartes formula in Latin, you get this: *I am thought, therefore I am*. I don't create my existence. I am the recipient of someone else's thought. God is the subject. I am the object of his thought. And only because of his ever constant, loving thoughts toward me, I exist. My very life is based on a relationship: God's initiating thought toward me. How precious are your thoughts to me. How vast is the sum of them, I awake and I am still with you. I am thought by you, and only therefore, I am.²

Can we take this farther? We know that John's Gospel begins by speaking of the Word, the Word who was with God and who was God. The Word is what God has to say to us that gives us his very self. The Word is Jesus the Son of God. And in the fullness of time, the Word did something extraordinary. Our second Scripture declares, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." God crossed the barrier our sin had erected. He breached the wall. We could not get back to God. Eden was closed. So he came to us, as one of us. Jesus fills lonely humanity with the presence of God in our skin. He brothers us. He walks with us. He becomes literally one with us.



So how can I help from bringing in my hero Thomas Torrance and one of my favorite sayings from him? This news of God's arrival in Jesus ever astounded Tom:

In his superabounding and overflowing love, God does not want to be alone without us, or want us to be alone without him. God simply would *not* be without us....It is in the Cross of Christ that the utterly astonishing nature of the Love that God is has been fully disclosed, for in refusing to spare his own Son whom he delivered up for us all, God has revealed that he loves us more than he loves himself...God...has irrevocably committed his Being to relationship with us in unconditional Love.³ This is the ground for the hope that we are not ultimately alone and do not need to languish in spiritual, internal isolation.

Our third Scripture tells us how we experience this. How we move from the loneliness of the fall to the companionship of redemption. Jesus said,



If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you (John 14: 16-17). Jesus is God with us as a man in the flesh, in this world. God broke through the barrier between us in Christ. But that news has

to go from something that happened outside of us to something that happens inside us. Jesus set up the basis of our being reconciled to God. We get in on that when he pours his Spirit into our hearts. He taught his disciples about his Spirit: you know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. The Spirit brings our union with Jesus right into the very heart of us. The Spirit is the one who companions us. He joins us to Jesus so that we experience not being alone, even in the darkest hour. He is there, and we are with him. He is in us and we are in him. An organic, spiritual, intimate connection.

OK, the Spirit fills our inner loneliness with reconnection to God. But how do I get the Spirit to do that? What if I don't feel that connection? The secret rises from this Scripture: if you love me, you will keep my commands, and I will ask the Father and he will give you the Spirit. We turn to Christ Jesus. We open our hearts to him. We say, "I want to obey you. I want my will to be synced up to your will. I want to grow in my love for you. Please, Jesus ask the Father to send the Spirit!"

That sounds very simple and it is, but it's also very demanding. My cherished sins and attitudes may be keeping me from experiencing the presence of God. My constant checking of my phone, of always having noise and voices and news on, of being in motion may all block my experience of his presence. Daily, intentional, carved out prayer, Scripture reading, worship are essential. So too is surrender. Reckoning yourself dead to sin and alive to God. Handing over whatever the Spirit points out that he wants you to release. Essential also is worship. Blessing God for he who is and all he has done in coming to us as Jesus to reconcile us. Connecting to other believers in real conversation and prayer. Letting spirits touch spirits to feel that wonderful, mystery of connection to each other because we are united to Christ. We have to open ourselves to him in faith and trust, and ask, ask for the Holy Spirit to connect us.

Are we all alone at last? We don't have to be. The inconsolable wound has been healed through the wounds of Christ. Jesus has reconnected God and humanity. We are *companioned* all the way through. Open your eyes and your hearts to see this glorious truth. I am thought, by God, therefore I am. When I awake, I am still with him. For his Spirit dwells in me, and I in him.

¹ Robert Penn Warren, "Mountain Mystery," from *Rumor Verified* (NY: Random House, 1981), p. 36

² Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (SF: Ignatius Press), 1968, pp. 246-7, 303.

³ Thomas Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p. 4-5.