



Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • March 6, 2022
The First Sunday of Lent



THE SCRIPTURE
Mark 6:7-13; 30-32

He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

*‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’*

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

THE MESSAGE
Sacred Rhythms: Creating Space for God
Mark Briley

Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday – the launch of Lent. Our pastoral team handed out a free cup-a-joe and ashes-to-go to any passerby downtown who was interested. And it was a beautiful day. That evening, this sanctuary held a beautiful gathering of young, and old, and any number of folks in between. Christians everywhere – even in the Ukraine came together to receive the mark of the cross on their foreheads as a reminder of our mortality and our need of God. Even sleeping babies in Kansas City, got in on the action.



There were seekers and doubters, and we were all here to say, “*I want to be intentional about this lent stuff,*” and so we got together and created space for God to start a work in our souls. “*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,*” we said of this life, “*insure and certain hope of the resurrection.*” It was a feel your own heart beat kind of evening, as if each inhale and exhale held an audible whispered word: “*Gift. Gift. Gift.*”

I once watched a doctor hold my newborn baby in the air by the ankles and give him a shake. I was alarmed. “*What are you doing to my kid? Can you do that?*” As a new parent, you have this sense that babies are so fragile, and you’ve got to handle them like grandma’s fine china. Doc picked up my newborn son like he was rubber, and while I was more than alarmed, he was just doing all of this to help my son take his first breath. And this was more than a first breath... it was the gift of life itself.

“Before anything else can be said about you, you have received a gift ... God has given you life. Are you breathing? Gift. Gift. Gift.”¹

Isn’t that extraordinary? We quickly forget this gift when we get on about our lives. We bump up against failure and pain, heartache, and abuse, and loss. While we grieve

¹ From Rob Bell’s “*How to be Here.*” Harper Collins. 2016. The quotes of these two paragraphs come from this work.

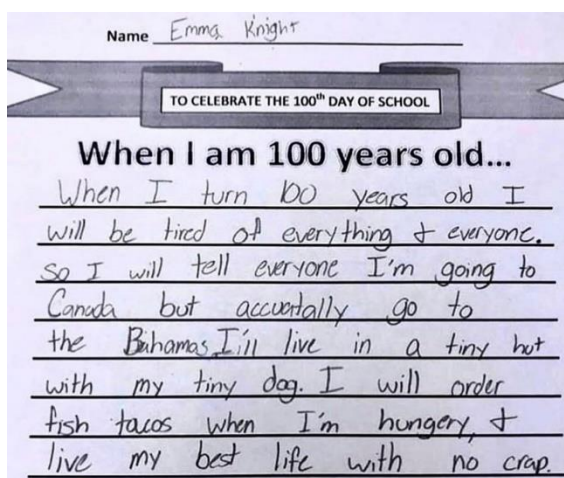
and feel and try to express all that is brewing within us, “*a truth courses through the veins of all our bumps and bruises, and [that truth] is this: We have received.*”

You are here. You are breathing. And this sacred season of Lent invites us to go back that far, that deep, to the very heartbeat of God. It is the question of this first Sunday of Lent. Do you remember the gift of your life? Your very breath? How do you remind yourself that it’s there? If you went on a hunt for your very soul, would you even know what you are hunting for?

Parker Palmer, an author, and educator, says “*The soul is like a wild animal – tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, self-sufficient. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently by the base of the tree, and fade into our surroundings, the wild animal we seek might put in an appearance.*”

We’re on a quest this Lenten season to regain the sacred rhythm that launched us in this world and today, we start with the gift and discipline of solitude as an entry point to re-connect with God in our extra-noisy, cluttered lives. Call it a soul hunt perhaps.

Jesus says to the disciples who have been out and about sharing the Good News they have come to know, “*Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.*” Do you make any space in your life for such a practice? We don’t tend to be creatures with great practices of solitude. We like the noise as Adonica reminded us last week in her beautiful word from the 46th Psalm... “*Be still and know.*” That stillness can be as scary as anything. Why? Because we don’t want to be alone with our own spirit... with God. At the same time: the noise we surround ourselves with gets overwhelming, doesn’t it? “*She’s too much,*” we say. “*I can’t deal with him today.*” It happens to all of us.



An elementary school teacher gave her students the assignment of writing what life will be like when they’re 100 years old. One little girl named Emma offered up a very honest response. See if you can relate. She wrote, “*When I am 100 years old... I will be tired of everything and everyone. So, I will tell everyone I’m going to Canada but actually go to the Bahamas. I’ll live in a tiny hut with my tiny dog. I will order fish tacos when I’m hungry and live my best life with no crap.*”

How many of you are ready to sign up for that life now? Emma may be on to something. The truth is: we live in a society that values productivity, success, achievement, and all-star status. Imagining time of solitude... silent space to listen to your own heart beat; feel your soul and your very breath again... in and out... *gift, gift, gift* – forget about it. Ain't nobody want to mess with that.

But this is extremely critical to building a spiritual foundation that can hold the rest of your life. Even daily doses of solitude will save you from the crash and burn that often takes down too many of us when we just can't keep up anymore.

The biggest changes in our lives come from the smallest adjustments, compounded over time.

When we consider the three years of Jesus' ministry (*Three years! That's it. Talk about getting a lot of work done in a short amount of time*) ... the primary work of his three years was to get ordinary people like you and me to remember that their lives were a gift, and they have what it takes to bring the kingdom of God to earth. To be effective in an ongoing way these disciples would have to learn to make space for God; not confusing activity, even Godly activity, with simply being *with* God... recharged, renewed. When we are in "go" mode all the time, we start to think it is we who are creating the world again and again in seven days.

Now... Jesus had the disciples active, yes. They had to get out there and start being the Church if there was ever going to be something we could call Church for the long haul. And in our text from Mark's gospel today (*not a third-person reference here*), we see that very thing. Jesus sends them out in pairs to teach and heal. They were told to pack light and weren't given any daily stipend or company credit card. No steak dinners. No luxury hotels. No lights and fog or cool skinny jeans like trendy worship leaders were starting to wear. "*You are the equipment,*" Jesus said. Big gulp.

They weren't ready for this, right? We never are. Or we *always* are, and we just don't think we are. But they're out there, preaching and teaching and listening to stories and sharing stories and anointing bodies and eating meals with people and healing those they could and *it was awesome!*

But... as so often is the case... when life is flying high and the spirit is soaring in powerful ways, something sweeps the leg. In this case, it's the death of their spiritual partner John the Baptist. He's beheaded on the silliest of whims and it had been the disciple's job to retrieve the body of their friend and bury him.

So, they've had this marvelous success and now this extraordinary grief and, as the text says, "*The disciples gathered around Jesus and told him all the things they had experienced on their journey.*" They surely had some one-up stories. "*Man, this one spirit we exorcised was epic.*" "*Yeah, well, Pete preached this one sermon that was the number one downloaded message of the week across the land and the whole community came to faith.*" Another chimes in, "*This one lady we met and sang for tried to pay us in meatballs. She was all, 'Hold out your hands!' just like that lady in the Wedding Singer.*"

The bigger issue, Jesus knows, is how these guys will sustain their spiritual life without being all consumed by outward successes. If they lose touch with the Spirit, they've got nothing. It is why Jesus insists on them doing what Jesus regularly demonstrated himself, "*Go on to that deserted place and feel your heart beat again.*"

Solitude is the longing for God... to experience God in an unmediated way. We so often try to mediate this connection with our words, or theological constructs, or religious activity. Solitude, however, is really this deep longing to find ourselves. But as Ruth Haley Barton writes in her book, "*Sacred Rhythms*²," this inspiration of this Lenten series, "*It's tricky to get the soul to come out. We are not very safe for ourselves because our internal experience involves continual critique and judgment, and our tender soul does not want to risk it. And so, we settle for a noisy spirituality which oftentimes is just an organized group of people crashing through the woods together, making so much noise that there's not a soul in sight.*"

As my good friend learned from his grandfather: "*The emptiest cans make the loudest noise.*" When we go and go and go, exhaustion sets in ... especially when we are accessible all the time. When our phones never get left on the dresser in the bedroom so we can be present to the humans we do life with, everyone loses.

Most of us are more tired than we know at the soul level. "*We are teetering on the brink of dangerous exhaustion, and we really cannot do anything else until we have gotten some rest.*" I had a colleague who was sharing with me about this struggle... Sabbath... a holy word we throw around but tend not to pay attention to... *Sabbath* being a holy day when we rest, break free from schedules and commitments and being the supposed boss of our lives to remember that we are not God and are not expected to be. *Sabbath*.

My friend was saying how we think of rest or Sabbath as what happens when we're exhausted... we collapse at the end of our break-neck-speed lives and call that

² *Sacred Rhythms*. Ruth Haley Barton. IVP Books. 2006. Her influence is evident in this message as well as in the formation of the entire series.

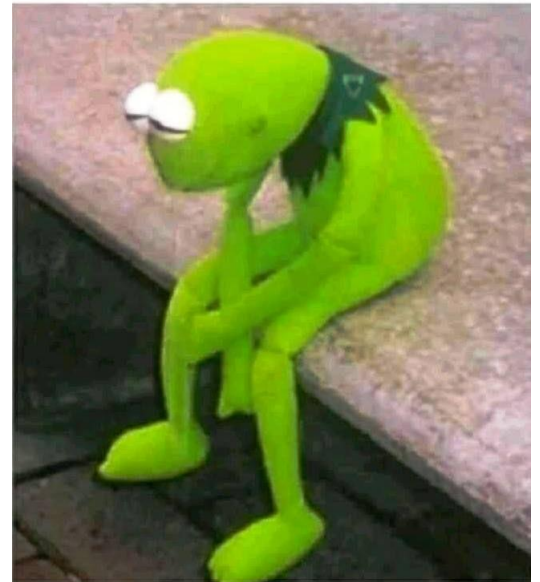
collapse Sabbath. But Sabbath is actually to come first. We are to work from our rest not rest from our work. Do you sense the difference? The intentionality is different and, I'll argue, that our productivity will be much better as well.

And I know what you're thinking... *"I don't have time do nothing. I don't have time for solitude. I am the god of my life, and I ain't got time to listen for some other God."* We may be resistant in this way... or we may be a little softer while still hesitant. *"I see the value... I crave the solitude but is there really any hope for me? I'm overcommitted and too far gone."*

My guess is your spirit is telling you it needs this. We're an exhausted people. Several friends posted this meme of Kermit the Frog that says, *"I feel like I am already tired tomorrow."*

I feel like I am already tired tomorrow.

Does that resonate with you? You've got private pain and disillusionment that you've been trying to shore up with inspirational pep talks that sound like somebody else's rhetoric more than God's word to you. You've got heavy decisions looming and you're exhausted to the point of not trusting your own judgment. Your ability to love and trust is wearing thin, and you're just simply on the brink of not being able to handle your life.



What I want to say to you... if that's what you're feeling is this... *"Don't be torn down by such discouragement. See your restlessness as an invitation to do something different."* You need space to be with what is truly real in your life – to celebrate your joys, grieve the losses, shed the tears, sit with questions, and feel your feelings. Could you start there?

Choose a place that feels comfortable and safe... a favorite chair, a favorite tree. Settle into a comfortable position in your body. Feel your heart beat. Breathe deeply. Sit patiently until you begin to notice what is most true about you these days. Don't rush. Don't try to make anything happen. Let your soul venture out to say something to you that perhaps you have had a hard time acknowledging. Sit with what comes to you and become conscious of God's presence with you in that awareness. Don't try to do anything with what you are knowing except be with it. In other words, as Ruth Barton says, *"Don't scare it away."* Feel the difference between trying to fix it and just being with it. Barton says, *"Feel the difference between trying to fight it and letting God fight for you. What does it mean for you to be still and let God fight or work for you in this particular area?"*

Solitude. It may feel strange at first but stick with it... regularly... the biggest changes in our lives come from the smallest adjustments, compounded over time.

For six years straight, prior to COVID, I had the privilege of retreating with the leadership team of the Bethany Fellows in Arizona in early February. It was such a powerful week in the desert year after year. I had started at Broadway six months prior to my last retreat in the desert. I carried a lot of work on my soul into that retreat. I was holding a lot with you... along with my own spiritual and life noise. It took six years in the desert to feel God's presence in a way that I had never before. You've got to stick with this stuff, you know.

This time, stepping out onto that desert soil, I almost verbalized out loud what I felt in my spirit: "*This place knows my heart. This desert has held my prayers before.*" One of our disciplines is to spend the best part of two days in solitude... we practice silence... cut out the distractions... get your spirit knotted tighter with God's.



On that second day, I climbed a familiar mountain and sat on this rock for a couple of hours all by myself. This was my view. I thought of you... named you in my spirit... held your pains that I knew of and celebrated your joys. I imagined some of you, who are in my life now that were not at that time, but I prayed for you to come into my life, and you have. I sat with myself in a way I hadn't for a long time too. It

was a big year of transition for my family. 40 years old. 20 years married. We were living in my mother-in-law's basement – and all the people of God said, "*Have mercy!*" Our kids were vulnerable and moving from the only home and community they had ever known. I just sat with my soul... and allowed it to feel what I hadn't made time to feel. It was hard and it was sweet. There were tears and there was healing. There was uncertainty and there was hope. Now I stayed on that mountain for a good while... honestly part of it was I realized it was going to be a lot harder to get down than it was climbing up. There was no path... it was reaching, stretching, and climbing rocks. But I also felt so close to God. I came down the better for having made the climb.

What climb are you ready to make? Real talk: I get invited into a lot of stories... greatest privilege as a pastor is your trust to say, "*This is my life... it's hard... will you*

hold it with me.” Of course, I will. I know your pains and your uncertainties and rejections and questions and breakdowns and breakthroughs.

I know you’re wondering if “*just sitting in the presence of God*” can really make any difference in your life. And I know it may be the hardest discipline of all. But if we want to have any foundation upon which we can build our climb of faith, we’ve got to come away to a deserted place, a park bench, a hallway in your home, and rest in the presence of God. Let that practice become the baseline to the song God is playing through your life. It will put you in the flow of the sacred rhythm and ground you in a way that nothing else can. Lent is an invitation to look at your life in a whole new way.

A few years ago, after launching Lent on Ash Wednesday, we had a church family come by the church the next day to receive the ashes because they were out of town for the Ash Wednesday service. That’s extra-mile discipleship. “*Ash Thursday*” they lovingly called it. My beloved colleague received them and made the mark of the cross on their foreheads... even Canaan in full Spiderman garb. As they left, his mother, Giselle, asked Canaan, “*Can you tell me what the ashes mean?*” “*I have dirt all over me,*” he said. His mom then asks, “*and what does that have to do with Jesus?*” Canaan says, “*He washes the dirt off of me.*” ‘Tis the season for deepening our practice friends. You’ve got to want it... give the extra time. Hold your heart. Feel your lungs breathe. I can’t wait to see what new life will find its way in our lives as *gift... gift... gift...*



May it be so.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH