

Ash Wednesday 2021: "Shhhhh! Do You Hear It?"
Mark 1:35
February 17, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

When you have a spare moment, what do you do? Noodle a crossword puzzle? Check the news feed on your phone? Read a few pages of a book? Pick up your embroidery or knitting? Text a friend? Load or empty the dishwasher? 'Seems like when our Lord Jesus had a spare moment, He prayed. He definitely wasn't "catch-as-catch-can" about it, though. He did more than steal the odd moment – He faithfully carved time out of His day. Our Savior went to prayer like a bee goes to honey. He imbibed prayer like a person dying of thirst guzzles water. Before making important decisions, when facing difficult days, after performing great signs and miracles, our Lord prayed. Here are some examples.

³⁵ In the morning [after Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and many others who were sick and demon-possessed], while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. (Mark 1:35)

⁴⁶ After [multiplying loaves and fishes and] saying farewell to [the disciples], [Jesus] went up on the mountain to pray. (Mark 6:46)

¹⁵ But now more than ever [after Jesus cleansed a leper] the word about [him] spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. ¹⁶ But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray. (Luke 5:15-16)

¹² Now during those days [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. ¹³ And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.... (Luke 6:12-13)

¹⁸ Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" ... ²⁰ [Then] he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" (Luke 9:18,20)

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." (Matthew 26:36)

When our Ministerium discussed a theme for this year's virtual Lenten series, "Jesus Frees Us" rose to the top like cream. So many aspects of our lives have been curtailed by COVID, lost to various aspects of lock-down, eliminated by the pandemic, that we thought a reminder of our **freedom** in Christ would be Good News indeed. I chose "freed to withdraw from the bustle, freed to disengage from the rat race, freed to frequent a quiet place and be with our Lord." (By the way, next Wed. at noon Pastor Joe Gratzel will preach on "freed from our prejudices," based on Galatians 3:28: *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*)

Our world doesn't invite silence; our culture doesn't encourage it. When's the last time you sat in a waiting room that didn't have a TV on? When's the last time you were in an elevator without Musak playing? In *The Screwtape Letters* C.S. Lewis imagines correspondence between a master tempter, Screwtape, and a tempter-in-training named Wormwood. The devils are portrayed as loving NOISE. What they HATE is silence (and music). After all, silence allows us to hear the still, small voice within, the voice of wisdom, the voice of conscience, the voice of holy caution, the voice of clarion courage. Silence allows us to hear the voice of God. When prayer **isn't** all about us prattling on with our wish lists of desired blessings – when our prayer is **listening to** and not just **speaking at** God – then we are freed to be in liberating, healing, empowering communion with the One who knows and loves us better than anyone.

I read an article last week called "Drowning Out Nature's Soundtrack in the Seas."¹ It's about the impact of human-initiated noise on sea creatures. The din of propellers in shipping lanes, the boom of seismic air guns, the cacophony around oil rigs, cause whales and sharks to change their migration patterns. Some species like the endangered Maui dolphin have a pretty limited habitat range and can't veer too far from home and still survive. Much smaller creatures

like the Red Sea clown fish come from larvae that initially float on the open sea, then mature into baby fish big enough to swim against the tide and find their way home to the coral reef where their parents and other kin live. Amazingly, the immature clown fish navigate by listening for the sounds of the reef, described in the article as “snapping, grunting, gurgling, popping and croaking.”² If those subtle sounds are drowned out by motors, dynamite, drilling, the little fish can only wander aimlessly. A Saudi Arabian marine ecologist explains the result: “The cycle is broken... The soundtrack of home is now hard to hear, and in many cases has disappeared.”³ ET cannot phone (or find) home if the static is too great....

Spiritually, maybe that happens to us. Maybe the white noise of the world drowns out the still, small voice of God. Maybe we don't intentionally carve out time to be with our Creator. Maybe we don't designate our time with the Divine, don't preserve time for prayer, don't save time to sit with our Savior, don't still ourselves to listen to the Spirit, so it never happens, not because we plan it that way, but because failing to plan is planning to fail, and busyness is our default setting.

How much would Jesus have accomplished if He hadn't withdrawn to quiet places to pray? How closely would He have cleaved to His Father in Heaven during His time on earth if He hadn't claimed time to commune with Him? Would He truly have been able to pray, “**Thy** Kingdom come, **Thy** will be done?” Would He have had the strength to declare in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not what **I** want, but what **You** will”? From the cross, with His dying breath, would our Lord have chosen to whisper, “Into Your hands I commend my spirit” if He hadn't kept the connection with His Father?

Jesus deputizes us to do the things He once did: to heal the sick, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the little ones, speak for the voiceless, encourage the despairing, challenge

oppression, help the Kingdom come, by God's grace, in this place at this time on our watch. But how can we do any of those things if we are not harnessing Heaven's power through prayer? How can we be sure we're being about **God's** business and not just following **our own** agenda? How can we discern when the time is to hold our tongue and when we are called to speak the truth, because "If you are silent, these stones will shout" (Luke 19:40)?

In Mark 6 we read:

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

You may recognize the story. The deserted place wasn't deserted for long because the crowds were stalking Jesus and actually beat Him and the disciples to the other side of the lake. The Lord invites us, also, to come away with Him to a quiet place and rest in prayer. It's the time apart now that enables us to join Him in ministry later, ministry to the crowd whom He likened to sheep without a shepherd, beloved for whom the soundtrack of home is so hard to hear over the din of the world. We must stay tuned to His voice so that He can use us to lead others Home – and so we can end up there ourselves. Amen

¹Sabrina Imbler, "Drowning Out Nature's Soundtrack in the Seas," *NY Times* (February 9, 2021, D1, D4).

²Ibid, D1.

³Ibid, D4.

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