

An Open Invitation to the Quiet Season

by Wayne Hancock

The sermon invites listeners to come aside from their busy lives and enter a place of quietness, where they can hear God's voice and receive guidance and direction.

Duration: 35:37

Scripture: Mark 1:2

Topics: "Quiet Season"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher begins by describing John the Baptist and his message of repentance. He emphasizes the importance of silence and listening to God, encouraging the congregation to incorporate moments of quiet reflection in their spiritual practice. The preacher explains that repentance involves acknowledging anything in one's life that hinders a relationship with God. He also shares his personal experience of growing in his relationship with Jesus and the need for consistent and intentional time spent with God.

Transcript

This morning our scripture reading comes in the Gospel according to Mark. The very first chapter, as we begin this season of Lent or season of the cross, we look again to the very beginning of the Gospel to hear the call of John, the call of God, the call of Jesus to us. Mark chapter 1, and I'll read the first eight verses.

In the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, it is written in Isaiah the prophet, I will send my messenger ahead of you who will go to prepare your way. A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. And so John came baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him, confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message, after me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. Amen. Praise be to God for his word.

Let us pray. Mighty God, as we come to your word, may you give us ears to hear afresh, minds to comprehend, and wills to obey what we hear from you this day. Through Jesus our Lord we pray.

How comfortable are you with silence? That was about 15 seconds worth. Did you squirm? Were you fidgeting? Were you feeling anxious for me? Thinking perhaps that I had blanked out, not sure what to do? How did you feel, expecting words but then hearing none? For the most part, we're a people rather uncomfortable with silence. Blaise Pascal wrote that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room.

Silence is something from which we generally flee. Pascal goes on, we require things to distract us from ourselves, hence it comes people so much love noise and stir. Hence it comes that the prison is so horrible a punishment.

Hence it comes that the pleasure of solitude is a thing incomprehensible. And so we build our distractions. Started with transistor radios and grew into those huge monstrosities of electronics that we called boom boxes.

And they've only grown more insidious as they've shrunk to the size of this little iPod gadget or something smaller. Blackberries or so called smartphones, I'm not quite sure why they're smart, I think people who invented them and then lock us into monthly programs, they're the smart ones rather than the phones. But it seems you never have to be silent, you never have to be alone.

There's always something there. You can stay plugged in all the time, plugged into your favorite music, your favorite games, your favorite shows, your favorite friends, your favorite job. Sort of acts like a leash or maybe a noose sometimes, don't they? They may be small, but they have the power to eliminate silence and solitude from our lives.

We are a noisy people living in a noisy society. Or perhaps like me, you enjoy times to unplug and be quiet. Distance cycling is my latest pursuit and there's nothing quite like a long ride, preferably on country roads, to soothe my noisy life.

Or there is camping and hiking and canoeing and the wild. Actually, for a city guy, there's a lot about the wilderness that attracts me. But even in those times of more solitary pursuits, I can find it difficult to really be silent.

Thoughts, memories, fears, to-do lists, all these things race through and disturb the silence of my mind. Quietness on the outside does not equate with quietness on the inside. Pascal was right.

We really have a hard time staying quietly in our own room. As we explore the Bible, we find that quietness, solitude, and wilderness are often special places that God uses. In the New Testament, one of the four gospels begins with that theme.

Indeed, it is the gospel I read from a few minutes ago. Our text this morning are those opening verses of the gospel according to Mark. And the words there are the words of the prophet Isaiah, speaking of the messenger who would announce the coming of the Lord.

The one spoken about is John, the cousin of Jesus. And what Mark alludes to by his placing John in the wilderness, the gospel writer Luke makes even more clear. John lived in the wilderness.

He was a man who was raised in the wilderness. We don't know exactly at what point in his life he went out, but he was known as a man from the wilderness. The wilderness, or the desert as the NIV translates the word, is a quiet place, an uninhabited place of solitude.

It was there with the basic diet of locusts and wild honey, with the simple tunic and belt, that John lived simply and attentively. As he went about his life in that wilderness place, John's relationship with God was nurtured and nourished. It was in the wilderness that he received his important call to repentance that ushered in the transforming ministry of Jesus.

We think of how significant the message of repentance is, and we often jump immediately to that, but that John received it in the wilderness is also significant. Many times you read in the Bible that God has met his people, instructed them, encouraged them, spoken to them in the wilderness. Consider with me for just a minute a few examples.

It was while Moses was in the wilderness tending his father-in-law's sheep that God spoke to him in the bush that burned and yet was not burned up. God spoke to Moses and told him to lead the Israelites out of their captivity in Egypt and to lead them into the desert, into the wilderness, in order to worship him. It was while they were in the wilderness that God taught the Israelites obedience and trust.

They were slow to learn, and so for 40 years they wandered through that desert place, through that wilderness, until all the rebellious ones had died. Then God led them to the promised land where they experienced abundant blessing. It was in the wilderness that God met the prophet Elijah, who would run there in fear because of the threats upon his life.

God speaks a word of encouragement to Elijah in the wilderness. He brought him comfort and nourishment and refreshed him for the work ahead while he was in the wilderness. When God spoke to Elijah, he spoke not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire.

God spoke to Elijah in the voice of quiet stillness. He spoke in the wilderness where Elijah had no other distractions. Sometimes it is only in the wilderness place where we are able to hear God.

Jesus, too, went out into the wilderness for 40 days to pray and to be with God. It was while the apostle John was exiled on the island of Patmos, a wilderness place, that he received the vision of Jesus, the vision of heaven, and indeed the whole message of revelation. In the Bible, wilderness is associated with the presence of God, with the preparing work of God.

It's no surprise then that John received the message from God while he was in the wilderness, and that many people from the Judean countryside and from all Jerusalem came out to him in that wilderness place. Now, it's important to note that when the people went out to the wilderness to hear John, they likely did not wait until their work was all finished, until everything was done, and then they went out to the wilderness. No, they set their work aside because their work, like ours, is never fully done.

There's always something more to do, always something that could keep us from going to the wilderness place, always something that would prevent us from going to that place of quietness, of silence. No, these people had to choose to set aside their daily activities and go out, and this is God's call to us, particularly in this season. It's not a call to abandon all responsibility, but a call to step aside, to go to a quiet place, either a physical location or a mental space where we stop what we are doing and are silent.

Jerusalem, you see, is about 32 kilometers from the Jordan River and about 1,200 meters higher in elevation. It was a long way out to John. The people had to spend time and effort to get there, and it was a longer and a steeper road back home.

But this was no quick and easy decision on the part of these people of God. It took time and effort to go away and time and effort to come back. But the word from God that John spoke to them made the whole trip worthwhile.

They came back a changed people. They came back ready to hear the one who's coming, John announced. They came back ready to hear the Lord Jesus, who began his ministry shortly after.

God's call to us is also to come out to the quiet place. Think for a minute the importance of going to a quiet place. If you want to really listen to someone, to your spouse perhaps, or to your children or to a friend, it usually happens best when you deliberately unplug from what you're doing and find a quiet place, maybe over a cup of tea or coffee, and sit and listen to what they say and listen to who they are.

It's in the quiet place that relationship is built. God calls us out to that quiet place for the building of our relationship. Perhaps that's what God is saying to us as we hear in Psalm 46 at verse 10, be still and know that I am God.

The question for us today is, how can we come away from the hectic pace, the noisy demands, the racket and the clutter of life? How can we come away from those things and stop and listen to the voice of one calling from the wilderness place? How can we do this? There are many ways. One of the ways that is a practice that's referred to by many different names. Some may call it devotions, some may call it quiet time, others may refer to it as daily office.

It is a time that we set aside to stop what we're doing and to be attentive to God. These are times to be still and know that God is God. But stopping requires discipline.

It also requires trust. Discipline to interrupt what you're doing, to set that time aside, and trust. Trust that God will meet you there.

Trust that he will refresh you. Trust that he will keep you focused again on the important things that he has for you to do. Trust that he will enable you to accomplish them.

You see, it's too easy to be consumed and distracted by the little things, by the trivial things, and thus miss out on the really important things. Investing time, quality time in our relationship with God. When I first began to grow in my relationship with Jesus Christ, I would spend one block of time at the start of my day to read the Bible and to pray.

And these were precious times and they helped me to grow spiritually. But over the years, I found that this really is not enough. Just like when I wake up in the morning, I don't eat one meal and then that's the end of it.

Get that over with and run through my day without thinking about food again. So I was finding I was hungry. After having that wonderful time of fellowship with God in the morning, I would begin the day by feeling really close to God.

You know, by mid-morning, it was starting to feel a little bit more disconnected. By lunch time, it seemed like it was a long time ago that I'd actually kind of connected with God and spent time with Him. By supper time, it was even further.

And by bedtime, it was a faint and distant memory. The busyness of life had run over all of that quality time that I'd spent, all of that that energy that I put into building that relationship at the beginning. I find now that I really need to have more times, more frequent times, shorter times perhaps, set aside in my day in order to reorient my thoughts, in order to reconnect with God.

Recently, I've begun to start and end those times with a period of silence. And I would commend it to you. I call it the power of two minutes.

For two minutes as I start, I disconnect from everything else, turn my phone on, do not disturb if I'm in the office, and hang my sign out and have two minutes of silence to think upon the God who has brought me into His family. Then I spend time in scripture and in prayer. But I also conclude that time with another two minutes of silence, two minutes to listen.

Because prayer is not only speaking to God, it's listening for God. Two minutes to listen. You thought that 15 seconds felt a little awkward this morning.

Part of that was because you were expecting to hear something. Try the two minutes. I found it to be a real blessing.

I found it to be a way in which I feel much closer to God because of those silent times, shutting out the voices that are screaming at me from the outside world. I invite you to consider doing this. We can't all rush out to the wilderness place.

We can't all run away to a place where there's nobody around. But we can be quiet just where we are. We can shut out the distractions around us, wherever we happen to be, even on a crowded bus.

The time of silence, the time of investing in our relationship with God is not about finding more time because we all have a limited amount of time. It's about redeeming the time that we have. It's about reordering our life.

As one author put it, it's about making space for God, setting aside those quiet times. In this season of Lent, there are many guides to help us enter this time of quietness. At our Lenten event on Friday, a wonderful event beginning this season, there were several booklets available to help focus our times of meditation throughout these 40 days.

Other resources are available right here in our Knox Church library. You may have some guide that you're using already, and that is good. But I would invite you if you don't have the practice already of including a time of quiet listening in your practice.

I find that beginning and ending time with two minutes of silence before God enables me to turn off the many distracting voices and to listen closely for God. I sense that this has really drawn me closer to the heart of God. As I draw close to God, I am lost in his love for me, and I hear afresh.

I hear, in a sense, with new ears, that message which John announced long ago. What was his message? Repent. With the words of comfort, acceptance, and insurance comes this word, this word of preparation.

Repent. This was the message of John. And so as I close, let me explain it to you briefly and invite you to join me.

What does it mean to repent? Repentance starts with acknowledging anything in your life that keeps you from experiencing a growing relationship with the living God. Anything that stands as a barrier between you and God needs to be recognized as just that. Now, we Christians have a little word to describe those things, and that word is sin.

Repentance begins with acknowledging my sin. But repentance is more than just acknowledging your sin and feeling sorry that you're not growing closer in your relationship with God. Repentance, indeed, is much more than just being sorry.

It starts with acknowledging that our sin, our rebellion against God, is serious and that it is blocking our relationship with God. But repentance also takes that next step. It steps away from that sin, and it moves toward God.

In another sense, repentance is the term for when we stop moving away from God and start moving toward him. You see, repentance moves us from merely contemplating the seriousness of our sin. It leads us to turn from that sin to embrace a new way, the way of God, the way of forgiveness, the way of new life in Christ.

One thing to recognize my sin, it's another thing to turn away from it, to be released from its power, and to embrace the forgiveness that God offers. This is the invitation that John extends to us. It's the call to us to prepare for the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This same call came from Jesus at the start of his ministry. Jesus said, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. Repentance is the theme for this season that we Christians refer to as Lent or the season of the cross.

It is God's call. It is God's open invitation to all. He calls us to stop, stop what we're doing, to come aside to a wilderness place and to listen.

It's the invitation to be still and know that he is God. Throughout the Sundays of this season, we're going to be journeying through the gospel according to Mark. We're going to be exploring different texts and different aspects of that gospel.

And throughout the weeks ahead, I invite you to join us as we journey through this gospel, as we enter times of silence and we see how silence before God enables us to hear more clearly and respond more deeply to the call of Jesus Christ. As we begin our journey, we start with coming aside, coming away from the noise, coming away from the busyness, coming away to a quiet wilderness place where we can hear the call of God to turn again and believe the good news. This morning, we're coming to the Lord's table, to a place really of quietness.

And I invite you to accept the invitation to come aside from your busyness, to come aside from the noise and the clutter that is your life and enter this quiet season as we gather at the table. The call of John is the call of Jesus to us as we come today. God calls us to come out of our place, come aside, to listen to him.

He calls us to turn and to embrace him, to embrace his forgiveness today. In this meal, God reminds us that Jesus offers us his body to nourish us, his blood to cleanse us from sin, his life to give us new life. He invites you to come, to taste and to see his love for you as we come.

We come in quietness. We come with expectation. We come to hear the living God.

We come to see his love demonstrated so beautifully for us this morning. Amen. Let us pray.

Loving God, there is so much, so much noise in our lives today. So many voices crying out to us to be heard, clamoring for our attention. Lord, distractions are many, but you call to us in the midst of these distractions.

You call to us to come aside, to come to that place of quietness so that we can hear more clearly your word to us, so that we can grow more deeply in our love for you, so that we can experience in a fresh way the power of your redeeming love and the joy of your salvation. Lord, this morning as we come, prepare us that we may hear you, that we may know you, the living God, that we may grow in you, that in every aspect of our being, we might receive what you offer to us, nothing less than the life of Jesus flowing in us. For we pray in his precious name, amen.

Our hymn speaks also of silence, the silence as we come to the table in our blue book of praise number 354, let all mortal flesh keep silence. Be seated. As we see displayed for us the things that represent the amazing work of Jesus for us, as we consider the depths of God's love and the wideness of his grace, as we've been considering his glory and his splendor, we recognize again that before coming to the table, we need to make confession, we need to repent, to turn and receive God once again and to acknowledge him.

I invite you to join in our prayer of confession. Let us pray. Loving God, you are the one who has made us and who knows us completely.

You who love us so deeply that you gave your own son for us. You know our predicament. You know, oh God, how quickly we become preoccupied with other voices, how quickly we become distracted by the demands and pressures and influences of others around us.

Lord, you know how within our own wills, we are prone to turn from you, to wander our own way, to seek first our kingdom, to seek first our righteousness, to seek first to justify ourselves with our endless speaking. Hear us, oh God, as we are quiet before you. Hear us as we listen to your voice calling us, convicting us of our sin, for we know, oh Lord, there is much within us.

Lord, perhaps sometimes we feel so uncomfortable in silence because it turns us back to think on ourselves. Hear us now, oh Lord, in this time of silence, as we confess the specific sins, those things that we've done that have been an affront to you and to your love, and those things that we have avoided, which would have been sources of blessing and encouragement to others. Hear us, oh God, as we make our confession in this time of silent prayer.

Praise be to you, oh God, that you take delight in hearing our confession, and Lord, that you are a God who pardons, that as we have confessed our sin, as we repent and turn from it, so you forgive us. Help us to walk in the freedom, in the newness of life that comes from receiving Jesus as Savior and Lord, from accepting and recognizing once again that we are forgiven people, that our sins have been removed as far as the east is from the west. Praise be to you, oh God, for we pray through Jesus, our Lord.

Amen.

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