

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
March 4, 2018

Space for God

Psalms 42-43

While the good news of Jesus Christ is meant for the entire globe, we normally use this time of the year to focus more on the impact of the gospel in North America. We reflect on, pray about, and give toward the sending of missionaries into the United States and Canada. For some of us, serving in another part of North America sounds like a long journey. But imagine yourself being sent to a continent other than North America. Not South America. Go even further south. Go to the bottom of the earth. Go to Antarctica, and more specifically to the South Pole. That's where you would have found Brett Baddorf, who lived there as a missionary from his home church in Tennessee, from January to November of last year.

In the cover story for the latest issue of *Christianity Today*, Baddorf writes about his life and experience with a small community of people at a research station in one of the remotest places on earth. Though he expected the subzero temperatures, the six months of darkness, and the sense of isolation to take its toll on his spiritual life, Baddorf actually discovered the exact opposite. His interaction with God's creation, and the space he had for deeper self-analysis, reflection, and meditation, ended up drawing him closer to the Lord and more alert to manifestations of God's presence, power, beauty, and goodness. In short, Baddorf says that he rediscovered "the blessing of solitude."¹ He writes:

In the modern, non-Antarctic world, it can be difficult to find places to be alone. We are surrounded by real and virtual community throughout good portions of our days. When we do need to set apart moments of meditation with our God, knowing how to handle stillness can be almost as challenging as finding it.²

In today's text, Psalms 42-43, the psalmist struggles with handling stillness and solitude, primarily because of his sense of God's absence. His experience of feeling separated from God comes to speech in the opening verse, where the psalmist compares himself to a deer thirsting for water when there is none. We're not sure about the details of the psalmist's crisis. It could be sickness, or something else that has him exiled from the community of worshipers. That's where he yearns to be, among the people of God in the house of God, the place of life-giving encounter with the Lord. In fact, the psalmist starts to yearn for those days when he could just hop in his car, go to church, and join his family of faith in singing, praying, giving, and listening to the preaching of the word. He especially misses the once-a-month fellowship meals.

But now, instead of the casserole dishes and crock pots spread out on the fellowship hall tables, all the psalmist gets to taste is his own sorrow. "My tears have been my food day and night," he says (v. 3). And as if the separation from the presence of God isn't bad enough, there are even some folks who mock the psalmist and add to his sense of pain and abandonment. "Where is your God?" they ask, with contempt.

It's no wonder that these two psalms actually work together as one, held in common purpose by the refrain: "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed with me?"

Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (42:5, 11; 43:5). "Why are you downcast, O my soul?" Notice that the psalmist is having a conversation with himself. The solitude and stillness created by his crisis have brought him into a space where he is in dialogue with himself, but in a way that points toward the presence of God, and brings God into the conversation.

J. I. Packer has described meditation this way: "It is a matter of talking to oneself about God and oneself. It is, indeed, often a matter of arguing with oneself, reasoning oneself out of moods of doubt and unbelief into a clear apprehension of God's power and grace."³ This strikes me as the kind of movement that happens in the psalmist's struggle with God. In one respect, it may sound like the psalmist has retreated to a prayer closet under the assumption that there's no one in that closet but himself. But in fact, the psalmist is never really alone. God isn't going to wait until the psalmist's sufferings are over, then show up. No, God is present in the midst of the sufferings, even when it sounds like the psalmist has no one to talk to but himself.

Like the psalmist, we all face experiences and circumstances that require us to make decisions about how we're going to handle solitude, as well as the stillness and silence that usually come with it. This time of the year leading up to Easter is a period when many Christians focus even more on the importance of spiritual disciplines, including solitude. For lots of us, this means being more intentional about having time and space in our lives where we can give God our undivided attention. This attentiveness to God is essential to a life of following Jesus. As Henri Nouwen has emphasized, "Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life."⁴

And yet solitude can be so hard to find or to create. True, there are some folks who have way more time alone than they actually want. They're lonely and isolated, and in some cases unable to get out of their homes to interact with others. Health problems, the death of a spouse, or other circumstances leave them feeling exiled from community and social engagement. This is a form of solitude that they hadn't sought out or hoped for. And yet there are many others, including lots of us, who are so busy being socially engaged that we don't carve out time for solitude. Our hectic schedules, job demands, family responsibilities, and numerous other obligations make for lives that are busy and productive, but not spiritually disciplined.

Our fixation on technology is one of the factors behind our declining capacity to be alone. Sherry Turkle has done lots of research showing that our addiction to technology costs us a lot when it comes to solitude. She says:

Solitude is the precondition of having a conversation with yourself. This capacity to be with yourself and discover yourself is the bedrock of development. But now, from the youngest age—even two, or three, or four—children are given technology that removes solitude by giving them something externally distracting. That makes it harder, ironically, to form true relationships. I have so many examples of children who will be talking with their parents, something will come up, and the parent will go online to search, and the kids will say "Daddy, stop Googling. I just want to talk to you."⁵

It's true that sometimes technology can enhance our connections with each other and bring us into engagement with one another in beneficial ways. There are even situations where we can use our devices as a resource in our devotional life through Scripture and prayer. But at the same time, our devices, especially our phones, can become such an extension of ourselves that it's hard to be separated from them long enough to be fully present to ourselves, and to others, including God. Imagine the psalmist wrestling with his crisis:

"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Oops, hold on a minute, soul, while I take this call. Sorry, wrong number. Now where were we, O my soul?"

Part of the purpose of solitude is to push back against our inclination to distraction, our fragmentation that hinders us from being more fully in the moment, focused on God and available to God. By practicing solitude, you're able to resist the forces that can mold you in ways that lead you to rely more on your own activity than on God's activity. Dallas Willard once noted an experiment done with mice:

A researcher found that when amphetamines are given to a mouse in solitude, it takes a high dosage to kill it. Give it to a group of mice, and they start hopping around and hyping each other up so much that a fraction of the dosage will be lethal. So great is the effect of "the world" on mice. In fact, a mouse given no amphetamines at all, placed in a group on the drug, will get so hyper that in 10 minutes or so it will be dead. "In groups," Willard noted, "they go off like popcorn."⁶

Like the mice in that experiment, our contemporary way of life, particularly the way that we feed off of one another's busyness, can keep us so revved up that we aren't even aware of the harm we're doing to ourselves spiritually. Again, this is where the spiritual discipline of solitude comes in, by helping you cultivate aloneness with God in ways that give life rather than being caught up in and consumed by things that separate you from God and bring death.

But solitude doesn't come easy. It's not the kind of thing that just occurs naturally. It takes intentionality and commitment. It takes having a time and a place for meeting with God. It takes consistency and expectancy about how God will be present and what God will do. It takes cultivating a rhythm in which you keep your appointments with God. Otherwise, time alone with God gets crowded out by other activities, demands, and voices. Plus, you may be apprehensive or fearful about the prospect of being alone with yourself, and with God. When you close off the outer distractions, you often have to face squarely and honestly your own doubts, struggles, questions, emotions, feelings, memories, impulses, and desires. Solitude can be unsettling because it requires you to deal personally and directly with God. He is present to you, and calls you to be present to him. Nothing is hidden from his sight.

That includes both our sins and our sorrows. When we enter into solitude, we bring those things in our lives that alienate us from God, and we acknowledge the circumstances that leave us feeling separated from God. "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?" What may at first sound like a conversation between just you and yourself is actually an opportunity to create space for God. A space where you can be alone with God. A space where you can acknowledge your sense of despair, and yet also a space where you can come in touch with God's hopeful presence. "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

¹ Brett Baddorf, "Lord of the Night." Christianity Today website. December 21, 2017. Accessed February 28, 2018 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-february/cover-story-lord-of-night.html>>.

² Baddorf, "Lord of the Night."

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973) 18-19.

⁴ Taken from *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups*, ed. Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith (New York: HarperCollins, 1993) 95.

⁵ Turkle was interviewed by Mark Fischetti, "The Networked Primate." *Scientific American* (September 2014).

⁶ Cited by John Ortberg in "Keeping Your Clock Ticking." *Leadership Weekly* (August 29, 2002).