
Silence as a Spiritual Gift

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We are surrounded by noise. There is always something playing in the background, something demanding our attention, something waiting for us on our phones. We listen to podcasts while driving, music while exercising, and television while eating. Even when no one is talking to us, our phones are buzzing, ringing, or lighting up. After all, none of these things are bad in themselves. But it is a good practice to make room for silence.

Silence is a spiritual gift. I know it can feel uncomfortable sometimes. It can strip things away. It can uncover things. But I have come to believe that it is not something we should be afraid of. Because in the silence, God can speak some of the deepest truths of our lives.

A few years ago, I had the blessing of spending thirty days in silence at a beautiful Dominican sisters' monastery in Switzerland. It was early spring. On one side of the monastery were snow-covered mountains, and on the other was a beautiful lake. It was one of those places where the beauty around you forces you to slow down.

For thirty days, I had no communication with the outside world. No phone. No internet. No letters. No email. We were eating, working, praying in silence. Every distraction was stripped away, and I found myself in the deep, dark waters of silence.

And it was in those waters that I discovered I was not simply discerning my future. I was also discovering the God I believed I was discerning with. I had entered the retreat thinking that silence would help me figure out what God wanted me to do. But silence gave me the space to hear not only God's call, but God's love.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to spend some time in silence again. This time, I was in the much busier town of Cambridge, Massachusetts in an Episcopal monastery there. And unfortunately, this time it was not for thirty days, but only for a week.

During that time, I turned off my phone. I took off my Apple watch so that the constant buzzing and notifications would not distract me. I did not realize how much I had become accustomed to checking something until I stopped checking.

And once again, I was reminded of the gift of silence. I believe silence creates space for us to hear ourselves, but more importantly, it creates space for us to hear God. Sometimes, instead of competing with the noise, God waits for us to make space for him.

We see this in the story of Elijah. Elijah is exhausted, afraid, and running for his life. At Mount Horeb, there is a great wind, but God is not in the wind. There is an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. There is a fire, but God is not in the fire.

And then comes silence. The Bible describes it as "a sound of sheer silence."

And that is where Elijah encounters God.

I wonder how often we miss God's voice because there is simply too much noise around us.

As we begin to wrap up the summer and return to our regular rhythms, perhaps we can carry a little silence with us. We don't need to begin with a thirty-day retreat. We can begin with small acts of silence.

When you drive, walk, or jog, try leaving the podcast or music off once in a while. Let yourself simply be present.

Put your phone away intentionally for ten or fifteen minutes each day. Let yourself discover what happens when you are not constantly available to the world.

And before you begin your day, give yourself a few minutes of silence. Before checking your email or reaching for your phone, sit quietly. Say a prayer. Read a few verses of Scripture. Or simply breathe and remember that you are in the presence of God.

And when the silence feels uncomfortable, don't run from it. Stay there.

The first thing silence may reveal is not God, but ourselves: our fears, our worries, our unfinished questions, and all the things we have been trying to avoid. But if we stay long enough, we may discover that God has been there all along.

As Thomas Keating reminds us "Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation." May we stop trying to constantly fill the space and become quiet enough to be able to talk to God in his first language.