

Lent 5 2019

St. Brendan's Anglican Church

Chase and Katie Whitmire

Isaiah 43:16–21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:7-16, Luke 20:9-19

Chase Whitmire

As I have meditated on our scripture for this week I have been overwhelmed by a common theme. If I could sum it up, this is what it would be: We have an unbelievably loving God who relentlessly pursues us--But I fear we are "missing it".

I don't know about you but I often think to myself when I read or hear scripture, "why don't God's people listen to Him? Why don't they believe Him when He tells them how much He loves them and wants to be in relationship with them and that He wants what is best for them. Almost as quickly as these thoughts form in my own mind I am convicted of my own disbelief and the ways I live just as they did.

To illustrate this point of God's love and pursuit, I want to look at a couple of our readings in particular. The first is Isaiah 43. We started our reading in verse 16 but I want you to listen to portions of the verses prior to hear God's love, care and pursuit of His people (this includes you and I by the way)

Hang with me as I read multiple verses... If you want, close your eyes and insert your name whenever you hear Jacob or Israel. Hear God's words to you, not just some random people in the Bible.

43 But now, O Jacob (insert your name here), listen to the Lord who created you.

O Israel, the one who formed you says,
"Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you.

I have called you by name; you are mine.

2 When you go through deep waters,
I will be with you.

When you go through rivers of difficulty,
you will not drown.

When you walk through the fire of oppression,
you will not be burned up;
the flames will not consume you.

3 For I am the Lord, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

4 Others were given in exchange for you.
I traded their lives for yours
because you are precious to me.

You are honored, and I love you.

5 "Do not be afraid, for I am with you.
I will gather you and your children from east and west.

6 I will say to the north and south,
'Bring my sons and daughters back to Israel
from the distant corners of the earth.

7 Bring all who claim me as their God,
for I have made them for my glory.

It was I who created them.”

12 First I predicted your rescue,
then I saved you and proclaimed it to the world.
No foreign god has ever done this.
You are witnesses that I am the only God,”
says the Lord.

13 “From eternity to eternity I am God.
No one can snatch anyone out of my hand.
No one can undo what I have done.”

16 I am the Lord, who opened a way through the waters,
making a dry path through the sea.

17 I called forth the mighty army of Egypt
with all its chariots and horses.

I drew them beneath the waves, and they drowned,
their lives snuffed out like a smoldering candlewick.

18 “But forget all that—
it is nothing compared to what I am going to do.

19 For I am about to do something new.
See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?

Do you not see it? These are the words that haunt me as I listen to them this week. Our readings also talk about the dangers of religion being a part of what takes us away from this relationship with God that we were created for or prevents us from seeing Him. Isaiah speaks for God in the end of chapter 43 saying: **28** That is why I have disgraced your priests; I have decreed complete destruction[c] for Jacob and shame for Israel”.

Our reading in Luke 20 highlight both God’s incredible costly love for us, as well as the pharisees blindness (and I would argue our own Blindness) to what He is doing in his pursuit of us. How did they miss it? How do we miss it? Where are we missing what God is up to today? How are we missing His continued pursuit of us today? I wonder what would be recorded about us and our own failings to see and acknowledge Him.

In our readings in Philippians this morning Paul describes his process of letting go of all the “other things” and “focusing on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race... Paul encourages us to follow his lead in pursuing this relationship with God above all other things--even church!

As I wrap up my part this morning, I want to summarize what I am trying to convey:

1. We were created out of the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to share in that loving relationship both with our creator and other creation. All of scripture proclaims His love over us and His relentless pursuit of us. This season in our church calendar highlights the climax of His love and puts an exclamation point on his pursuit of relationship with us--His death, burial and resurrection.
2. The second thing I want to encourage us towards is to stop to see Him, to hear Him, to taste Him. I don’t want to be like the Pharisees, the religious leaders or Israel and miss it! As in all of

human history, we are overwhelmed by everything else that is around us. So many distractions, far too many things vying for our attention. Hear the words of the prophet Isaiah to St. Brendan's this morning saying, "I am about to do something new. I have already begun! Do you not see it?"

When Doug asked me to share a few months ago, he mentioned his vision of our Lenten messages containing some practical ideas on spiritual disciplines that might help us as a congregation seek Jesus. I asked Doug if Katie and I could tag team this morning with her sharing some practical ways that we might be able to hear what God might be doing in us and around us--this idea of not missing it that I mentioned. When I think of people in my own life who do this well, Katie is at the top of the list. I am excited to hear what she says and for all of us to try and put it into practice and to make it part of our spiritual rhythms during this season and beyond.

Katie Whitmire

Chase's first point is He made us out of love and pursues us with love

His second- See Him Don't miss him

In thinking of a Spiritual discipline that addresses both of these points, that would help us seek the one that reminds us of our belovedness, still ourselves to experience His pursuit, a spiritual discipline that creates space to see him & not miss each new thing that he is doing, I think of Solitude. Solitude is one of the disciplines that allows us to separate—maybe it's from the chaos and busy-ness that mark your days or maybe the mundane -- and re-connect to truth.

He made us out of love and pursues us with love

Out of love we were created in his image, given a unique and beautiful true self --that is God's gift to us. But along the way voices and experiences discourage that truth, send it into hiding. These same voices & experiences ultimately push us, striving towards a different identity, thinking we were created for something else. We pursue other things so fervently we ignore his pursuit of us. And so we begin to put on other, more "acceptable" identities we've been creating, a false self. This is built around our successes, our appearance, our job, our social status, education, family position, etc. These things are not bad things, often they help us function in the world, but when these secondary things become primary, we lose touch with our true self. We substitute these constructed identities for our true identity of love, and that's when we begin to miss it—to miss him.

We have to encounter (find) that true self again ... and sometimes again. And as I have journeyed towards this, I've decided that I cannot be my true self, live out of that center of love, without a regular practice of solitude. Literally, solitude is the state of being alone. We leave people. As a spiritual discipline though we not only leave the physical presence of people, but the collective voices behind as well— good and bad—that shape who we are. These may be the expectations of those closest to us or the messages of our culture. Opening ourselves up to the one voice that spoke our true selves into being and continues to speak it. It is God's desire to woo us away, like a lover, to remind us in these moments alone of our true self, his beloved. And the more regularly we quiet those other voices, the more regularly we shed these "costumes" or

identities we put on, in order to bear ourselves and tune ourselves to the voice of our creator, the more readily we recognize his voice. Making it easier to enter back into the world, our relationship and live congruent with that true self.

I believe we see a great example of this in Paul in our reading this morning from Philippians. Paul has encountered Christ and has quieted the voices and shed the markers of his false self, those secondary identities, his credentials or as the MSG says everything I used to take credit for, he counts them as rubbish, throwing them out. They are worthless compared to knowing Christ- Who he is and who he says you are.

In her spiritual disciplines handbook Adele Ahlberg Calhoun lists some of the fruits of solitude. In them you can hear evidence of the shedding of false self and encountering true self.

- Freedom from the need to be occupied and stimulated
- Moving away from letting the world squeeze you into its mold
- Liberation from constantly living your life in reference to other people
- Quieting the internal noise to better listen to God
- Giving yourself time and space to internalize what you already know (true self, Christ in you, you were created in love for love.)

So, how do we practice solitude in order to get back to that true self in order to recognize his pursuit, in order not to miss what he is up to?

It's not a formula and its not a one size fits all. There are certainly varying degrees of practicing solitude, but I do want to try to offer some practical ways to practice this discipline. I've put together some resources—prayers, meditations, exercises you might use – that Doug has printed out for us. Please take one. But here are some things that I have found true.

First, Make space. For me right now with a full time job and 4 kids, that looks like waking up 45 minutes before the rest of the house. It's the only time of day that there is any hope for solitude. And maybe you're not a morning person or you can't imagine carving out 45 minutes, I would encourage you that whatever you have, whenever you have it is enough. 15 minutes, just start with making space to cultivate this relationship, to allow yourself to be pursued. Sitting alone, regularly with God. Without preforming. No agenda. Just being with him. It is in this place that I shed my striving, remove my costumes, and leave people behind.

Ahlberg Calhoun refers to solitude as a "Container discipline" in that it opens space for us to practice other disciplines like journaling and scripture reading. This is indeed a part of my regular practice of solitude, but for these short snippets of solitude, in the beginning (or re-beginning) of a practice, Could I suggest that you not add anything, not even scripture. Just be with him. Allow him to pursue you. Listen.

Now if you are in a regular practice of solitude you may find yourself longing for more time, solitude begets solitude. So you will open up more time. Maybe it's an hour, maybe it's an unscheduled Saturday These longer periods of solitude may be when you do add in other disciplines. You can get away from home, go to the mountains, or an open church, a museum. Know yourself as you pick your place. There can be both benefit and detriment in practicing this particular type of solitude. For me, removing the distraction of to-do's that surround me at home aids the shedding of the "doing" part of my identity and allows me to be. Leaving my everyday space also allows a fresh perspective, a new way to see God. But exposing myself to others in a public space can make me vulnerable to including those people in my solitude. Have I been

sitting on this bench too long, is the curator wondering why I haven't moved on... those voices creep in, while for Chase these thoughts may never cross his mind. So know yourself as you choose your space.

Finally I want to talk about Retreat. Something Chase and I have both benefitted from -- 24 hours or more in silence often practiced in community but filled with solitude. These usually take place at monasteries or retreat centers and I would encourage you to seek this practice out. There is a lot to be said for an extended time of solitude. Giving yourself time to truly quiet, time to shed false self identities, time to reconnect with your desire. Much like vacation, when it takes several days to finally settle in, take a deep breath and feel like you are "off". An extended time of solitude and silence allows us to access those deeper places. In my experience, those extended times of solitude have provided such deep connection with true self such a deep sense of my identity as beloved they have changed the trajectory of our lives. I still draw on these experiences years later. Maybe Doug would put a retreat together for us @ St. Brenden's 😊.

I don't intend to make it sound easy. It is definitely a journey. If you've never practiced solitude or it has been a while, it may be challenging. We receive a lot of reward from "doing" and we receive affirmations from our secondary identities and it can be painful to relinquish them. There can be darkness in solitude but it will not overcome the light.

Take comfort in this... God wants to do it, to do this deep work of reconnecting us to our identity in him. Our job is to be Receptive. To Make Space.

In our readings from Isaiah we hear about a God who makes a way in the desert, provides water through the wasteland and in Psalm 126 the Message says we have a God who brings rain to drought stricken lives and his people cry "do it again God!"

He longs to and is willing to quench our thirst for him, our desire to get back to that true self.

I have been amazed at how faithfully he shows up.

God give us the courage and the space to be alone with you. Teach us how to leave the often loud voices that compete for our attention, hold us gently as we shed our false identities and watch as you do something new.