

Being Alone with the Alone

Mark 1:9-13

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

I

Most of us go into the wilderness at some point in our lives, but there are at least two kinds of wilderness experiences. The first kind of wilderness experience is the one most of us do not want. We get divorced, and the divorce is difficult. Our best friend dies, and we mourn for several years. We lose our job, and we get angry. In this wilderness, we feel lonely, forsaken, despondent.

The honest truth is that this kind of wilderness experience is lonely. We have to go through it by ourselves, just as Jesus had to be in the wilderness for 40 days by himself. Sure, we can talk with others about the wilderness we're in; we can ask others to pray for us; we can graciously receive their offers of kindness. Even so, other people cannot magically take away our loss, our loneliness. The experience is ours, and we must get through it largely on our own.

At other times, God calls people into the wilderness. This is the second kind of wilderness experience. I know someone who sensed a gentle nudge from God to "go into the wilderness." At first the person had no idea what that meant, but after several years the person gradually came to see that it was a call to greater solitude, so that in solitude, the person could be with God in more life-giving ways.

So there are at least two types of wilderness: the first one is unwelcome because it makes us feel lonely, and the second one comes as a call from God to solitude.

II

Solitude is not the same thing as loneliness. If I feel lonely, I am profoundly unhappy with my loneliness. I want to get rid of it. Maybe I impulsively grab at any relationship I possibly can in a desperate ploy to get rid of the emptiness I feel. The tragedy, of course, is that the more desperately I try to latch onto my friends, or my family, or my dating partners, the more likely I might drive them away through my own neediness.

The solution to loneliness is not a mad, impulsive quest for more relationships. Instead, the solution to our loneliness is to embrace solitude with God. When I am lonely, I feel all alone. I am by myself. But in solitude, I am with God. In solitude I cultivate my awareness of God, who is always near at hand. I cannot be where God is not. If I am the only person in my condo, God is still there. If I am in prison, cut off from my family and friends, God is still there with me. If I am living alone in a large city where I don't know anyone, God is still there and available to me. The real question is whether I'm doing what I need to do to become more fully aware of God in my loneliness. Becoming more aware of God will, over time, make me feel less lonely and more like God and I are companions. That's actually a good definition of solitude: solitude is living in deep companionship with God. Or as some Christian hermits have often phrased it, solitude is being alone with the Alone. When God and I are companions, my loneliness starts to drift away.

III

To us Anabaptist Mennonites, it sounds strange, almost heretical, that God might actually call someone into a life of solitude. Our theological tradition has emphasized community relationships so strongly that we have a hard time imagining why anyone would want solitude, much less why God might nudge someone into solitude.

Any yet if we think about it, a lot of us actually do spend much of our lives in solitude already, whether we've chosen it or not. Single people of any age live with a kind of solitude. So do widows and widowers. And then we must also note that it's quite

possible to experience solitude even in marriage. If at the end of life we live in a nursing home, we will experience a type of solitude, even though many other people are around us. One of our congregation's own members, Goldie Hostetler, displayed a remarkable contentment with solitude in her final years of living at Greencroft in nursing care. The last time I visited her, she was mostly confined to lying in bed. And yet her contented companionship with God was clearly evident. Goldie and God were intimate friends.

When we are in a wilderness, we have an opportunity to be alone with God, to deepen our companionship with God. This is true in both types of wilderness experience, the one we don't want because it's painful, and the one we willingly embrace because God calls us into it. Israel discovered this when for 40 years they sojourned in the wilderness. In the wilderness they could learn to be free of the things in Egyptian society that prevented them from enhanced companionship with God. Jesus also discovered this, when for 40 days he too sojourned in the wilderness, where he learned that the resources and blessings of intimate friendship with God were still available to him.

The invitation for us is to move from loneliness to solitude. The person I mentioned earlier who sensed a call from God to "go into the wilderness" had early in life experienced periodic bouts of loneliness. Over time, the person realized that loneliness could morph into solitude, or companionship, with God.

I yearn for us Anabaptist Mennonites to make room in our theology for solitude as well as community. One compelling reason to do this is the plain fact that many of us actually do live in solitude for substantial lengths of time throughout our lives. Solitude is a reality among us, so why not admit it and work with it? We have rich biblical resources for solitude, including the Psalms, the stories of many of the prophets, and even Jesus himself. If we can do this, then I think we will discover that when we learn to live well in solitude, our communal life will become more robust and resilient.

Whether you are single, married, or single again, what solitude could God be trying to form in you? What might solitude look like in your life? What sort of intimate friendship does God want with you?