

I want to start with a question. When was the last time you experienced sheer silence? When was the last time that you didn't hear a podcast or music, the roar of traffic planes flying overhead? When was the last time you experienced a long period of silence? Silence is nearly impossible in our world. I think of the complexities of the Bay Area and how fast-paced it is. And for most of us, we can't escape the sheer white noise that is living in this area. Even if we're able to escape that noise, most of us actively avoid silence because we tend to think of it as something that must be endured rather than entered.

They've done studies that have pursued the question of when does silence become awkward. And what they've found is for the average American, four seconds of unplanned silence is when it becomes awkward silence. Even if it's planned silence, the average American adult can't endure 20 to 30 seconds of planned silence before they begin to squirm and get a little uncomfortable.

Most of us are pretty uncomfortable with the idea of silence. We live in a noisy world. Think about our regular rhythms. When you get home, one of the first things you probably do, if you're like me, is turn on the TV or maybe you put on music, you get in your car, and you plug in a podcast or the next whatever album you're listening to. When I get on the airplane, one of the first things I do is pop in my AirPods and tune out the rest of the world. We live in a noisy, noisy world.

There's an author named Richard Swenson who's a futurist who envisions where culture may be going in the years to come, and he wrote a book called *Margin*. He was trying to track in recorded human history the rate of change in culture. And so he went back to the year 3000 B.C. or about 5,000 years ago, and he begins to track the big, significant cultural changes that have taken place. Five thousand years ago was essentially when humans started recording.

He found that between 3000 B.C. and the present, the line has been almost completely flat, with just a subtle change as the years and centuries progress. The whole book is his thesis or claim that in the past 40 years, we as a culture have experienced more change than the previous 5,000 years combined. What complicates this idea of noise and stepping into silence is this progress of change. The world has changed so rapidly over such a short period of time that for most of us, we don't even remember a time before all of this radical change. And we see it more and more, which we've been talking about the past couple of weeks; we've talked about this problem of acceleration in our world.

Think of something like transportation. The way we've moved from horse and buggy into the automobile, into trains and planes and all of it. Think of now how you can stand on a street corner, pull your phone out, and hail an Uber or a Lyft within moments and get wherever you

desire. The world has changed radically fast, and in that, the world has gotten noisier and noisier.

I think for most of us, life feels chaotic, and we seem to bounce from one thing to the next over and over and over again. But what we're looking to do in this vision is organize in the midst of this chaos, in the midst of this anxious fast-paced world, our life in such a way that Christ becomes that organizing principle around us.

I've had so many good conversations with many of you over the past few weeks, as you guys have been talking and sharing your reflections on the past sermon series, and so many of you have shared that all this looks different for each of us in our stage of life. We have many empty nesters. We have those who are retired. We've got moms of young children and dads of older high school kids and students and those who aren't married yet and singles and all these different types of people. And yes, there's a difference in the way we experience the fast-paced world, and there's a difference in how we apprentice under Jesus. But one of the important steps is recognizing that at any stage of life, there are different complexities.

If Swenson is right, and the pace of change has been as rapid and drastic in the past 40 years as the previous 5,000 years combined, then regardless of the stage of life, there's a new way to live in this world that has never been experienced before. And so all of us, regardless of the stage of life, have to begin to ask the question, "What does this look like for me?" Because it will look different. Stepping into a habit of silence and solitude will look different for the empty nester than it will for the college student, than it will for the family with young kids, than it will for the single adult.

It will always look different, but nonetheless, this modern world that we swim in, that's covered in speed and change, will still require us to somehow resist that ongoing onslaught of the pace of life and lack of margin.

So what I want to ask is, "What is that counter habit?" What do silence and solitude look like in the life of Jesus? Our Rabbi, our Savior, the one in which we are apprenticing under? What did the habit look like for him? And then what would it look like for you and for me as well? We're going to look at a small text in Matthew 3, and we're going to look at a lot of different texts where this habit of silence and solitude pops up in the life of Jesus.

I want to read this quote from Susan Muto, who says this.

**In a noise-polluted world, it is even difficult to hear ourselves think let alone try to be still and know God. Yet it seems essential for our spiritual life to seek some silence, no matter how busy we may be.**

## Silence is not to be shunned as empty space but to be befriended as fertile ground for intimacy with God.

I love that phrase at the end where she says that silence is not something to be shunned but is to be befriended. Most of us avoid silence, but yet what we see in the life of Jesus is that he befriended silence and solitude. He embraced it as part of his own spirituality and discipleship. And so, too, we must come to that place of embracing and befriending silence if we are to grow and resist the pull of always being on, always faster, always distracted in the world around us.

[Matthew 3:13-15](#) So this is a big moment in the life of Jesus as he walks through this process of baptism. It's really the launch of his public ministry and life. And so he goes out into the wilderness, he meets John the Baptist, and he says, "John, it's time for you to baptize me." And John being the humble man he is, says, "Listen, I need to be baptized by you, not the other way around. But Jesus says, "No, no, no, to fulfill all righteousness; you need to do this." And so John finally gives in to that.

[vv. 16-17](#) Now consider for a moment the scene. Jesus is being baptized in the Jordan River coming out of the water, and it says that the heavens opened; a voice of God comes down and says, "This is my son whom I love and am well pleased." what a scene. What a moment.

[Matthew 4:1-4](#) Did you catch that at the beginning? In 4:1, it says, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Has that ever struck you as odd? That Jesus was led by the Spirit at the Spirit's direction and leading, taken out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Why would the Spirit lead Jesus into that particular scene?

Well, theologically, if you've been reading from Genesis 1, you would understand that at some point, Jesus was going to come face to face with the tempter, with the devil. And so we know that theologically, but it still seems odd that the Spirit would lead Jesus out into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights alone, fasting. And that then the devil comes in and tempts Jesus. If you're like me, I always heard this story as a kid and thought, Man, isn't that crafty like the devil to come to Jesus in a moment of weakness? After spending 40 days fasting and alone, of course the devil comes then to tempt, to catch him at his weakest. So why then would the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness?

Well, just a little while ago, I was listening to a pastor preach on this text, and he raised the point that I had missed all along. He says, "Listen, it's not so much that in the desert, after the fasting and solitude and silence for 40 days and 40 nights alone, that Jesus was weak, but rather if the Spirit led Jesus there, it's actually after that 40 days that Jesus is at the pinnacle of his spiritual power."

The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness because he knew this time out in the middle of the wilderness would be a space of strength for Jesus. It would be a place where he communes with God, with such connection and vitality that it would give him the power to overcome Satan's temptations. I had the story wrong, the whole fasting and silence and solitude is not a space of weakness, but rather it's a source of strength.

It says there in verse 4 that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. The Greek word for wilderness is one we looked at a couple of months ago in the Gospel of Mark. It is *erémos*. And *erémos* has a wide semantic range where it can mean wilderness, desert, or lonely place. It can also mean desolate, solitary, and quiet. It has this broad range of understanding, but really what it's getting at is this space in which you are deserted, away from everything and everyone. You are in an uncultivated, desolate place.

When Jesus was led by the Spirit into the *erémos*, he was led out into this vast open nothingness where he alone was now encountering the Spirit. When Jesus was led there, in verse 1, he's experiencing this silence and solitude. He's communing with God in such a way as to gain that power and strength from the Holy Spirit who intentionally led him out into the *erémos*.

The *erémos*, which we'll see in a second, is one of Jesus's favorite places to be and is not a source of weakness but of strength. The *erémos*, this wilderness where you go out, and you separate from everything around you to encounter the very presence of God, is a powerful place. It's a place we all need. It's a place where Jesus would escape the crowds. He'd escape the demands of his disciples. He'd escape the threats of the religious elites who was after him. The *erémos* was this place of solace, where he would fill up his tank and find himself in a place of spiritual power.

This is so counter to the way we, in the world, think. We think of power as being one where you have influence, and you're filled with words and positional power and prestige and all of those things. That is where you rise to a position of power. But for Jesus, his source of power was nothing like that. It was actually escaping away from where all the people were. For Jesus, the source of power was in silence and solitude. It was separate from the crowd, separate from all the noise, separate from the chaos of daily life. This was the place of power for Jesus, *erémos*, this wilderness, the set-apart place.

What you find for the careful reader of the gospels is that this wilderness or quiet place, or you'll see it translated differently throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus' life. But in all of these moments, you'll see that Jesus has this *erémos* rhythm. Where over and over, he returns back to this wilderness throughout his public ministry. You'll see him step into this *erémos* in times of reflection to times of busy work and ministry. He'll retreat to rest and reconnect with God. You'll see him go out to minister, go out to be with the disciples, teach, and then once again retreat into the wilderness to then engage back again. There's a cadence, a rhythm in which Jesus oscillates between work and rest with God.

In the *erémos*, what you really find is two different things, and Jesus experiences both in the *erémos*. You experience external silence, where you are separated from the noise. I think of something like Carmel down on the coast of California. I think of maybe Mendocino in the northern California coast or out in Death Valley or whatnot. In these spaces, you can separate and experience real external silence.

Jesus experiences this external silence. It disconnects him from the demands of modern life. It pulls all the input around him. It separates him from that so he can experience peace of mind.

But even more so what Jesus experiences in the *erémos* is internal silence. It's in this place where silence becomes this *erémos* experience, this internal silence, which is more of a state of mind than it is a particular position. And was in internal silence that Jesus could slow down enough to where he stopped the busyness of the thought life and of the mind in a way in which he could reconnect with God and God alone. He could refocus; he could recenter. The *erémos* is this connection between external and internal silence, where it begins to be the place of rejuvenation for us.

Richard Foster describes this in his book *Celebration of Discipline*. "In the midst of noise and confusion, we are settled into deep inner silence. Whether alone or among people, we always carry with us a portable sanctuary of the heart." I love this because internal silence can be done anywhere. You can find internal silence on the Bart on your way across to the East Bay. You can find it in a car ride where you stop the music and don't put on the podcast but just drive.

Even external silence, you can find it, yes, out on the coast or in the forest or in Tahoe; but you can find internal silence in the anonymity of a downtown urban cafe. I think often one of my favorite places to work is a local coffee shop. Usually, I drive up into the city and put my AirPods on, and I don't put music on, but often I'll just put noise canceling on and sit in silence and solitude. Yes, there's external noise, but it's white noise. There are people around, but there's an anonymity there where I can experience what Foster calls a "portable sanctuary of the heart." This *erémos* we can carve out and create in different places in our life, in different rhythms in our life. It's less about the physical location than it is about the posture of your being and your heart.

What I want to demonstrate really quickly is I want you to see how much Jesus loved the *erémos*. So I want to rapidly fire a whole bunch of texts here at you.

In the text we just read, we see Jesus inaugurating his ministry by spending 40 days alone in the wilderness. In [Luke 6:12](#), [Matthew 14:13](#), [Matthew 14:23](#), [Mark 1:35](#), [Luke 5:16](#), [Matthew 17:1-9](#). There is [Matthew 26:36-46](#). Jesus needed that *erémos* rhythm to fill him with spiritual power for what he was about to do.

One more in Mark 6. After the disciples were sent out to preach and to heal and do ministry, they came back and returned to Jesus. The first thing Jesus says for them to do is in [Mark 6:31](#).

The *erémos* was clearly one of Jesus's favorite places. Over and over in the gospel accounts, we see him retreating away from the crowds, not to escape and be some recluse, but rather to fill up, connect with God, be present to that which was most important, and then begin to reengage in ministry around him.

For most of us, we live in a world of increasing change, acceleration, busyness, fast-paced, and distraction, and many of us resonate actually with this Mark 6 text, don't we? The disciples get back from work, and

they don't even have time to eat. Most of us just struggle to put dinner on the table in a way in which we can slow down and eat with our families. But we're so busy we can't even eat. Like there's no way I could actually carve out a silence. But what I want you to see is you're not alone. If you have a hard time even thinking through how you are going to slow down to eat your next meal. Or how are you going to carve out a space to be silent? You're not alone.

The disciples understood this. Jesus understood this. But what we need is this *erémos* rhythm, and Jesus says to these disciples, as they came back in Mark 6 from all of this ministry, he says, "Come away with me by yourself so that we can escape away and binge the next season of Stranger Things." Or he says, "Come away with me so we can get away on vacation and kick up and rush around." No. What Jesus says is "Come away with me by yourselves to the *erémos* so you can get some rest."

Most of us in the modern world confuse leisure with rest, and there's nothing wrong with those examples I just described. There's nothing wrong with vacationing by the pool or watching Netflix or the season of Stranger Things or whatever it is. There's nothing wrong with that, and no one should feel guilty for watching a show at the end of the night. Absolutely, that's fine. He says, but what your soul needs is rest. And there's a difference between leisure and rest. Leisure is not a bad thing, but it's not rest for your soul. Jesus looks at these disciples, he looks at us, and he says, "Come get away with me to the *erémos* and experience rest, soulful rest."

When we get to the end of binging whatever show it is or camping out on the couch and flipping on whatever we can to distract us, most of us don't think, "Man, I feel better." Most of us are not genuinely rested at a soul level. What we need is an *erémos* rhythm where we recognize the wariness of our souls. As apprentices of Jesus, we need to take on these very habits and practices of Jesus' life so we can begin to live the life of Christ. We need rest for our souls. We need silence, and we need solitude. In this habit, we find a regeneration of our very souls.

You could define solitude this way. Solitude is time away, time alone again in the physical location of a cabin in the woods or in the anonymity of downtown in an urban area. But whatever it is, we need time where we disconnect from the busyness of our lives. Solitude cracks open the shell of our own insecurities, and it opens up the whole of our lives and all that's within us. In solitude, we can no longer be and live off the codependency of others in their approval, but rather in solitude, why most of us avoid it, is because it opens our life up, and we're laid vulnerable before God just as we are. For many of us, we don't want to face that.

It's in solitude that we sever ourselves from the intoxicating feeling of being the center of attention. We practice not being needed and realize that we are not the grease that turns the wheel. It's exposing our false self and our false sense of importance in a way that says, God; you are at the center of the universe, not ourselves. But it's only through this presence of solitude do we find we're never actually fully alone. But rather, in solitude, we are in the very presence of God, and we lay our

lives before God. Solitude is different from isolation and loneliness. It's a communion with God.

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun describes silence. She says, "Silence is a regenerative practice of attending and listening to God in quiet without interruptions or with noise." See, silence is the way in which we disconnect from the noise, and we sit in the very presence of God. We find that still small voice who's been calling to us and crying out to us all along. It's in silence that we free ourselves from the addiction to distraction and noise in order to be fully present to God in silence. We loosen our perceived sense of control and are given the opportunity to practice simply being before God. Silence starves our ego because we can't rely on words to control others ourselves or God himself. But it's in silence when we stop speaking that we just sit again, laid bare before God. I don't think it's too big of a stretch to say that oftentimes an abundance of words brings about sin.

Now for many of us, the more words we say, the more trouble we get into. And this is coming from someone who more or less talks for a living. In silence, we disconnect. We can no longer self-justify. We cannot dismiss our behaviors or our deepest longings because, in silence, we release control of our lives, and we lean into trusting God. Silence and solitude are fundamentally about trust. It's about laying the fullness of who we are before God and saying, "God, we trust that we will still be loved." Silence and solitude force us to confront ourselves. It forces us to confront our desire for God or even maybe what we most fear—our lack of desire for God. It forces us to look inside and recognize the shell of who we want to be or become, but it's in silence that we are loved by God, simply for who we are. I think you could define it this way.

### **Silence and solitude are intentionally separating one's self from the ordinary rhythm of life to be present with God and ourselves in the quiet.**

Before we move on, I also want to define silence and solitude by the things that they are not because I think there are a few disclaimers that are important. First, silence and solitude are different from mindfulness. In the past few years this practice of mindfulness has been all the rage, particularly in business circles. It looks very similar to silence, but it is still a very different practice. There are all sorts of apps and books about mindfulness in our world that have been written about this practice, all of which I actually don't think are a bad thing. I think mindfulness, in general, is actually a pretty good practice, but it's not the Christian conception of silence and solitude.

Rich Vellodas, a pastor in New York, writes about this distinction.

**There's been much talk in our culture about the benefits of mindfulness. The difference between mindfulness and silent prayer is communion with a person. The object of mindfulness is often better psychological and physical health (very important things), but the object of silent prayer is communion with God.**

The difference between mindfulness and silence and solitude is that in mindfulness, you are alone with yourself. Your aim is to get into a better

mental state or physical state. Again, those are good things, and I'm not down on those things, but the practice of silence and solitude, particularly in the way of Jesus, it's radically different. It's about disconnecting from the noise and distraction of the world so we can commune with the very one true God. So it's in silence and solitude that we encounter communion with God.

The second distinction I want to point out is that silence and solitude are not loneliness or isolation. We can also confuse those two because they look alike. They looked like when you seclude yourself in that solitude that it feels like you're isolated or lonely. But there's a big distinction. We are created to be in community, and so when we see this rhythm of Jesus to escape from the crowds, it can't be that that's the end goal to just hold up as a recluse, but rather silence and solitude is a way to disconnect from all the demands and the pressures. Not to escape them but rather to say, "I need to connect with God here. I need to bring God into this." And so solitude is not loneliness or isolation.

Richard Foster, in the book *Celebration of Discipline* I mentioned earlier, has this great line where he says, "Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment." Loneliness is inner emptiness, but solitude is inner fulfillment. See, solitude is different because it's where we go from feasting on others to feasting on God and allowing God to be the very core thing that fills us up from the inside out. Solitude fulfills us. Loneliness or isolation begins to slowly erode us. It's not what we are created for. Loneliness and isolation are often not voluntary things, but rather circumstances have forced you into those spaces.

But solitude is a willful stepping into *eremos* in order to be with God. And it's in silence and solitude that we see two dimensions of our own transformation. In the same way that Jesus was experiencing internal and external silence when he escaped to *eremos*, what happens in the *eremos* is those two dimensions; the internal self and the external self are the two things that are transformative.

The external self is the way in which we encounter the world around us and the people around us. When we create this *eremos* rhythm, our external selves are slowly transformed. Because in the *eremos*, we detach from unhealthy codependencies. We don't pursue the approval of others. And so what we learn in the *eremos* is that the external self can come fresh to people around us in a new way. Where we aren't seeking their approval, or we aren't seeking their positive energy or whatnot, but rather, we come to them to just love them as they are because we've learned to be loved as we are. It changes the way we interact with others around us.

It's in silence and solitude that we grow in patience, that we grow in gentleness. All those fruits of the Spirit begin to swell up in us as we connect and live connected to the Holy Spirit. It's in silence and solitude that we learn how to be in community because we know how to be within ourselves. When you're confronted with your shadow side, it forces you to deal with it. And when we deal with our shadow side, we show up better in the world for those around us. So slowly, over time, the external self is also transformed.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this beautiful little book called *Life Together*. He wrote,

**Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. And let him, who is not in community, beware of being alone. Each by itself has profound pitfalls in perils. One who wants fellowship with solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.**

See, what Bonhoeffer understood is that if you're to show up to others and be with others, you need to know how to be alone. And if you want to show up alone and do the internal work, you have to show up to be with other people. The day alone and the day together go in unison. You cannot have one without the other if you want to be healthy followers of Jesus.

So as we do this *erémos* rhythm, the external self begins to be transformed. But what happens at maybe a deeper level is that the internal self begins to be transformed as well. In silence, the internal self becomes vulnerable. As we slow down and face ourselves, we're confronted with all of the emotions that we've been numbing and distracting away from. We face the good, the bad, and the ugly—the whole of our own hearts and our own soul.

In silence and solitude in the *erémos*, the internal self is confronted where we can no longer run and hide from it; rather, it is just laid in front of us to bring before God for our healing. It's in silence that we face our desire, our habits, our bad addictions, our egotistical motivations, or whatever it is. It's in silence that we starve the ego; we starve the false self and allow ourselves to just connect with God one-on-one. We cut through the cacophony of voices around us that are always pouring in and demanding more and more from us. We cut through those to hear the very voice of God and let him speak to what is truest about us—that we are loved as his children. that we don't need the approval of others. We don't need this affirmation. We don't need all those external things. But rather, when we find our identity, and we behold God, that becomes the animating part of our life. It transforms us from the inside out.

See, it's this *erémos* rhythm that I'm convinced has the power in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, where we begin to be transformed from the inside out, the internal self. The external self begins to integrate into one whole healthier human because God is working to transform us into his people, and in the *erémos* in silence and solitude, we begin to take steps towards that.

On your way in today, you probably got one of these, habit cards. As we were planning this series and talking through everything, we wanted this to be practical so all of us would have an idea of how to step into the *erémos*. And so, on this card, we've created a starting practice on one

side and a stretch practice on the other. And there are four or five just really basic steps, where if you've never experienced silent prayer, you've never tried this idea of silence and solitude, you could pick up this card, and it would point you in the right direction.

I encourage you to find a way to carve out space this week and start with the starting practice with just a small little step in. And then it grows with the stretch practice to cultivate a more daily rhythm with more time in silence and solitude. But remember, all of this is just a tool that in a particular moment of our life, our moment, we need to follow Jesus a little more closely. If for some reason, it doesn't work for you, that's okay, or if there's more that you already do, that's okay as well. This is just a practical tool you can take to start to cultivate that *erémos* rhythm.

To close, I want to end with a simple thought. For most of us, and I think in the modern evangelical church, in particular, we have an infatuation with celebrities, with people, with influence and reach, and all that. And I think what happens over time is that we've attached ourselves to somebody else's spirituality. But what we're inviting you into, what I think Jesus is inviting you into, is to no longer live vicariously through someone else's spirituality. To stop living vicariously through a podcast, a preacher, a pastor, or a friend.

What Jesus is inviting you into, what I'm inviting you into is to begin to own your faith in a way where you experience God's presence firsthand. Where you create and step out. And that can be difficult and challenging, but at some point, we have to detach the codependency on others and just say, "I'm here to commune with you, God, all by myself."

In the *erémos*, in the silence and solitude, we just take one small step towards that. And ultimately, we trust what Jesus would say in Matthew 11. The words that I kept coming back to this week are, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Church, may we go to him, may we respond to that invitation. This week, may we step into that *erémos*, whatever that looks like for you. And just begin to lay ourselves before God and say, "We are weary, we are burdened, and what we need is rest." So church, I invite you into this habit of silence and solitude this week.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2022 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA  
Catalog No.1472-1FC