

Several years ago, while serving as pastor to a Presbyterian congregation, I did something that I am not proud of. I worked tirelessly, day and night, to be faithful in my calling as a minister. I worked so hard, in fact, that I worked myself right into a hospital bed... not once but twice.

I was driven to work that hard by anxieties that are common among the clergy of small parishes: aging buildings, shrinking budgets, and low attendance. I thought that, if I was really a good pastor, the parking lot would be overflowing, donations would be pouring in, and the church would have to build an extra wing just to accommodate all the new people joining with their families. The fact that these things weren't happening made me feel afraid that I was failing at my job, failing the people I loved at my church, and most of all failing God.

I compensated for this fear by working as long and as hard I possibly could, beyond what was good for my health, sometimes staying in my office until 2 o'clock in the morning. "If I, as their pastor, just worked harder," or so I thought, "then the church would be doing better."

This line of faulty reasoning is not unique to clergy. People who work in every conceivable field, from education, to healthcare, to law, to business, and to government, all of them are subject to the endless social pressure to perform, achieve, and succeed. The market-driven economy of our society operates under the unwritten rule and unspoken assumption that the value of a person's life depends on that person's ability to produce and succeed on an economic level. The fact that we even use monetary words like "value" and "worth" to describe human dignity is a sign of how deeply this avaricious mindset has infiltrated into our collective unconscious.

This state of affairs is nothing new. Throughout human history, the temptation has always been there to mistake function for identity when considering the quality of human life. The author of our psalm this morning, Psalm 62, talks about their own experience in noticing the capricious ebb and flow of fortune on the stormy sea of the economy. The psalmist writes, "Those of high degree are but a fleeting breath, even those of low estate cannot be trusted. On the scales they are lighter than a breath, all of them together" (Psalm 62:10-11).

In the very next verse, the psalmist goes on to describe the kinds of moral temptation that arise when we try to measure life with the ruler of economic achievement: "Put no trust in extortion; in robbery take no empty pride; though wealth increase, set not your heart upon it" (12). What we can see here is a person of faith desperately trying to navigate the ship of conscience through the stormy seas of moral dilemmas.

The good news in this psalm is that the psalmist has discovered a still center and a firm foundation beneath the chaotic waves of life's surface. The psalmist writes, "[God] alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken. In God is my safety and my

honor; God alone is my strong rock and my refuge” (7-8). We can hear echoes of this psalm in the nineteenth century *Mariners’ Hymn* by William Whiting, which states:

“Most Holy Spirit, who didst brood upon the chaos dark and rude,  
and bid its angry tumult cease, and give, for wild confusion, peace;  
O hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea” (The Hymnal 1982, #608).

The societal anxiety that drives us to mental burnout and moral compromise is founded on the fear that, beneath the chaos of life’s waters, there is nothing but the darkness of an empty void. Psalm 62 urges us to realize that this is a lie. God is present in the stillness beneath the surface; this is why the psalmist commands, “Put your trust in him always, O people” (9). This is the same point that Jesus makes, in our gospel this morning, when he says, “The kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). An earlier translation of this verse renders it as, “the kingdom of God is *at hand*” (KJV, emphasis mine). I invite you now to hold your hand out in front of you and repeat those words out loud. One of the names we frequently apply to Jesus in the Christmas season, “Emmanuel,” literally translates from the Hebrew as, “God is with us.” God *is* with us; God’s kingdom is *at hand*, as Jesus himself has said.

The stupefying truth that Jesus is communicating here is that God we believe in is not some distant entity, but a very present reality. St. Augustine of Hippo picked up this line of thought when he prayed to God, “You were more inward to me than my most inward part” (Confessions 3.6.11). In another place, St. Augustine also prays, “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (Confessions 1.1.1).

Psalm 62 agrees with Augustine in proclaiming, “For God alone my soul in silence waits; truly, my hope is in him” (Psalm 62:6). This is a confusing statement, given what we have just said about the nearness of God’s presence. How can one wait for someone who is already present?

Imagine that you were to see me in town one day, standing on a street corner, next to our priest. You walk up and ask me what I’m doing and I reply, “Waiting for the priest to get here.” I would not blame you, in that moment, if you then told me that I needed to get my eyes (or my head) examined. You might tell me, “Turn around, Barrett; she’s right there!”

That kind of turning around is what Jesus means, in Mark 1:15, when he tells his followers to “repent.” Many have come to associate that word with guilt and sorrow for one’s sins, but the Greek term used here, *Metanoia*, is best translated as, “Change your mind.” Its Hebrew equivalent, *Teshuvah*, literally means, “Turn around.” What Jesus is inviting us to do in this gospel is change the way we think about God and realize that, beneath the chaotic waters of life’s surface, God is already present with us in the stillness. As Augustine has already told us, God is more present to us than we are to ourselves. What the psalmist calls us to “wait” for then is not the arrival of God, but the realization that God is already here.

My own realization of this presence came after my second trip to the hospital with stress-related illness. I realized then that, if I was going to survive in life and ministry, I needed to find a more grounded and balanced way of living. The only people I was aware of who knew how to do that were monks.

A quick search on the internet revealed that St. Gregory's Abbey, an Episcopal Benedictine monastery, was located in the city of Three Rivers, just forty minutes away from my house. I booked a week-long retreat as quickly as I could. During that first week at St. Gregory's, chanting and meditating with the monks, I learned for the first time what it feels like to be quiet on the inside. I've been chasing that feeling ever since.

What I began to learn in the monastery that week is the meaning of the psalmist's proclamation, "For God alone my soul in silence waits; truly, my hope is in him" (Psalm 62:6). By letting myself drop below life's chaotic surface, I found the presence of God in the stillness. The Benedictine way of spirituality changed the way I pastored my congregation, the way I parent my children, the way I relate to my spouse, and the way I live my life.

I made it my mission to visit the monastery as often as I could and bring its way of life home with me, as much as possible. After several years, I made a permanent commitment to that community, not as a monk but as an oblate. An oblate, for those who may not be familiar with the term, is someone who would be a monk, but is prevented by some kind of lifelong commitment (like marriage). As a husband and father with a full-time job, I am not able to rise at four o'clock every morning and pause to attend church services every three hours, but I am able to keep the spirit of the monastery alive in me by pausing for prayer and silence at the beginning and end of each day. I have found that the guidance of the Rule of St. Benedict is just as helpful for busy parents as it is for monks. Through the monks at St. Gregory's Abbey, I managed to stay out of the hospital and found the kind of balance I had been looking and longing for.

Today, on the third Sunday of Epiphany, The Episcopal Church encourages its parishes to celebrate Religious Life Sunday. This is a day when we give thanks and pray for the many orders of monks and nuns in The Episcopal Church. St. Gregory's Abbey, by far the closest, is just about an hour away from here in Three Rivers. There are many other communities, each with their own unique identity and calling: The Order of St. Helena, the Society of St. John the Evangelist, the Order of the Holy Cross, and the Community of St. Mary, just to name a few.

What these communities all have in common is their commitment to follow Jesus and live out the words of today's psalmist: "For God alone my soul in silence waits." I encourage you to learn about these communities and remember them in your prayers. Above all, dear friends, I encourage you today to look beneath the chaos of life's surface and find there, in the stillness, the living heartbeat of God, who is more present to you than you are to yourself. May your

discovery of this presence bring you peace and balance as you continue to navigate the troubled waters of this life.

Amen.