

ARE YOU LISTENING?

I Kings 19:11-12

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The students here this morning who were on our junior high mission trip team are the same age as some of the boys who were trapped in a cave in Thailand earlier this summer. The 12 boys ranged in age from 11 to 16. They were in the cave with their assistant soccer coach, whose first name is Ekapol, for 17 days.

I am an optimist by nature, and I choose optimism and positive thinking whenever possible, but even I was beginning to doubt that they would be rescued alive. As we now know, all 12 of the boys and their coach are fine. It was British divers who first saw the group in the cave. When they were first spotted, the boys weren't screaming or crying or curled up in a fetal position in despair. Instead, they were sitting quietly in the dark, meditating.

Their coach Ekapol taught them to meditate. It's a practice he knows well, from the time he spent in a Buddhist monastery.

The boys were extremely fortunate that the cave wasn't too hot or too cold, that they had air to breathe and a bit of clean enough water to drink, that the Thai Navy Seals were able to rescue them, although with one fatality.

They were lucky, to be sure. But it is also clear that their capacity to endure the stress of this life and death situation was strengthened many times over by their coach who taught them how to be still.

Meditation is known to have a host of health benefits and may be uniquely suited to help people cope with extreme stress. Several studies have found links between meditation and an immediate, measurable reduction in feelings of depression and anxiety as well as physical pain.

It also appears to help us turn the volume down on the intensity of nearby disturbances, like the sound of car traffic. That benefit of meditation could have proved hugely helpful to the Thai players, who were cold, scared, and alone more than 2 1/2 miles deep into a cave network. Meditation also increases feelings of empathy, another key asset for a small team of isolated people who need one another to survive.

Two weeks ago, I mentioned in my sermon that there are three words I keep hearing and reading, three words that seem to summarize the experience of modern life for many people right now. Those three words are stress, anxiety and loneliness. Our culture is feeding us a steady dose of stress, anxiety and loneliness. It happens when we believe certain cultural myths, when we inject messages that seem true but aren't really true. When we believe what society is telling us, when we buy what society is selling us, we find ourselves caught up in a cycle, spinning our wheels in desperation. Two weeks ago, we looked at the myth that says that money buys happiness. Money isn't evil, but if we live as if money and things will make us happy, we'll end up disappointed and empty. Rather, the keys to happiness are found in healthy relationships, in meaningful work, and in service to others. Our biblical faith leads us to these answers which prove more deeply satisfying than anything we can buy on Amazon. Even Amazon Prime. Even on Prime Day.

The myth I'm exposing today is perhaps a more sub-

tle one. It is the idea that we always need to fill our lives, our minds, and our living spaces with noise and distraction. As a culture, we are unaccustomed to silence, we are often uncomfortable with quiet. Many people turn on the TV the minute they enter their homes, walk down a city street and notice how many people have headphones in their ears. Sometimes we're listening to several different forms of media at the same time.

Ok, you might say - this might be important for emotional reasons, but why are you preaching about it? Is this a moral issue? Is it a spiritual issue? Well, something's not working for us, since anxiousness and stress and loneliness are so rampant, so it makes sense for us to examine all of our habits. Our biblical faith gives us not just a moral compass, but also keys, clues, to how to lead more healthy, whole and happy lives. We are created by God in particular ways, and our lives best function when we pay close attention to what leads us towards becoming the people God intends and needs us to be.

The biblical narrative contains stories and words of encouragement about silence, passages that seek to direct us towards incorporating moments of silence into our lives. I particularly commend to you these eight words from Psalm 46. "Be still, and know that I am God." "Be still and know that I am God." There seems to be a direct connection between stillness and an awareness of God's presence. When we silence the other voices, we can hear God speaking. In the New Testament, in the gospel of John, Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." Can we distinguish the voice of Jesus among the many other voices we hear every day? How can we listen to God if we're never silent? How can we follow Jesus if we're not

sure which voice is his?

One of the most famous stories about silence is the one Beau read to us today from the book of I Kings, about the prophet Elijah. If you were to go back to chapters 17 and 18, you'd read about Elijah's many successes. He confronts kings, he performs miracles, he even calls lightning down from heaven. But now, in chapter 19, we find Elijah intimidated by his opponents and filled with self-doubt, complaining that things are not going his way; he is perhaps even suicidal. It's a time of anxiety and stress and loneliness for this biblical prophet.

Elijah decides to talk with God about his desperate situation. He makes a pilgrimage to a holy place, and then he waits in a cave for God to give him a message. When a great wind comes, he assumes God will speak to him through the wind. Then an earthquake comes, but still no message from God. He witnesses a fire, and expects God. After all, God appeared to Moses through a burning bush. But still no message. Then he hears a faint, murmuring sound, a still, small voice. He has to strain his ears, but this time, it is God, directing him towards his future, instructing him as to what he should do when he returns home. God speaks to Elijah, not in the way Elijah expected, but perhaps in the only way Elijah could hear and pay attention.

One version of the Bible calls it the sound of sheer silence, another calls it the calm, whispering voice. In that voice, God says to Elijah, and to each of us, "I am with you." "I will always be with you." It is a voice that shatters our loneliness, calms our fears, and reduces our anxiety. Because if God is with us, no matter what we're facing, we're not alone.

Practicing silence helps us become more aware of God's constant pres-

ence. It builds up spiritual resilience that prepares us to cope with the stress of our time and place.

I leave you with this question, “Is there space in your life for listening to what God wants to say to you? Where could you find stolen moments, here and there, to practice that kind of listening?” Even extroverts need quiet; all of us do. Our souls are crying out for the kind of reconnection with God that only comes when we’re still.

Our addiction to noise and distraction may be making our lives more anxious and stressed, or making us less able to cope with all of the sources of stress around us. Cultivating the ability to be still, even for a moment now and then, will help us build spiritual resilience and help us listen to the messages God is trying to give us. I encourage all of us to try it, including the students here today who might be feeling anxious about the start of a new school year.

Hopefully, none of us will ever have to try to learn stillness in a desperate situation, like being trapped in a cave. But it’s good to develop these habits before we ever need them...