

03.03.24

**“Finding the Beauty in Stillness”**

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

**Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>2</sup> Give thanks to the God of gods.

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>3</sup> Give thanks to the Lord of lords:

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>4</sup> to him who alone does great wonders,

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>5</sup> who by his understanding made the heavens,

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>6</sup> who spread out the earth upon the waters,

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>7</sup> who made the great lights—

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>8</sup> the sun to govern the day,

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>9</sup> the moon and stars to govern the night;

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>23</sup> He remembered us in our low estate

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>24</sup> and freed us from our enemies.

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>25</sup> He gives food to every creature.

*His love endures forever.*

<sup>26</sup> Give thanks to the God of heaven.

*His love endures forever.*

**Leader: These are Words of Encouragement for the People of God!**

All: Thanks be to God!

**Matthew 11:28 (NLT)**

<sup>28</sup> Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

**Mark 6:31 (CEV)**

<sup>31</sup> But so many people were coming and going that Jesus and the apostles did not even have a chance to eat. Then Jesus said, “Let’s go to a place where we can be alone and get some rest.”

**Revelation 2:4 (CEV)**

<sup>4</sup> But I do have something against you! And it is this: You don’t have as much love as you used to.

**Leader: These Words of Jesus Are for You.** All: Thanks be to God!

**Please pray with me:**

Creator God, we thank you again for this week of Bible Study, worship, fellowship, and communion. Help us to find beauty in ordinary things, like rest and stillness. Motivate us to dig into these Scriptures as we grow closer to you during Lent. May we understand your Word today and apply it to our daily routine, as we seek to balance our lives with work and rest. Speak through this messenger this morning. Amen.

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I have a question for you. Do you jump right out of bed in the mornings or are you a snooze alarm person? It occurred to me that there are distinct types of morning people: the get up and go types and those who take a little quiet time to become fully awake. Even when I was in school, I was the latter, and not out of laziness or sloth, but from genetics and how my brain works with light. I never served in the military, so a trumpet *reveille* rise and shine was never instilled. My dad was that type of riser, up before dawn, coffee, goals set for the day, and ready to rock and roll. My mom, however, rose later and needed at least an hour on the couch with her coffee and thoughts before carrying on any conversation. Although I tried my dad's morning rituals for many years, my natural circadian rhythms prefer slower mornings of quiet time with God, deep thinking, and then bursts of late afternoon and evening physical and mental activity. For years, I saw this as a shortcoming until I learned more about morning larks and night owls. Only 10% of people are morning larks, and 20% are true night owls, so most of us are somewhere in between! Whew! We are all ok.

Jesus was both. Mark 1 tells us that after sunset, the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon possessed. He healed diseases and drove out many demons. Then, <sup>35</sup>Very early in the morning, while it was still dark,

Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” And in our verse today, after being around many demanding people, Jesus and his disciples went to a “solitary place” to be alone and to rest. It is only out of that rest and supernatural refreshment with his Father that Jesus could continue to care for the people, heal, and cure their infirmities. Don’t you feel that way after a day of service? Fulfilled but physically tired, and that’s good! It shows you met a group or person’s needs that day. For Jesus’ context, he knew that the Pharisees put extra purity restrictions on the people, no longer just the priests, for the sake of the law, and they struggled to obey the 613 Levitical laws. The Matthew verse we know so well: “<sup>28</sup> Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” releases his hearers and the disciples from that pretentious following of the laws to the letter. He was the new law and came to fulfill it and prophecy. A relationship with Christ would restore courage and beauty.

Being a parent, grandparent, or great grandparent brings both energy and drain; I was with family yesterday and was so energized as we shared memories and reconnected. But in the evening, although I would not have changed a thing, I found I was emotionally exhausted! All because of positive stress and many feelings that came up. Jesus set us a good example. Rest is not bad or something you do only when you are sick. Rest is and can be time with him. My Saturday nights now are quieter and are used to mentally prepare for Sunday mornings in God’s presence and with you.

Being is more important than doing or having, despite what our culture teaches. As a child or youth, were you encouraged to be still or

quiet to daydream, think, or pray? Probably to be quiet, but that was more about obedience than creative thinking, so stillness is a learned skill.

What is stillness? The quality or status of being still, unmoving, an absence of movement. It is the intentional state of rest, repose, but with the purpose of sensing all that is around us. It is not a nap! And this is not a sermon about our physical need to exercise, because that is true too! Both things can be true: movement is medicine, rest is needed after muscle or mental work. Too much rest is not good either. For our purposes, we are speaking of intentionally slowing down to receive God's guidance.

On Sunday mornings, we become still after the prelude, continuing to fellowship with one another until our welcome and prayer. We eventually become physically still in church, but it is not until Pianist plays the prelude that we become mentally still; our minds and internal thoughts take a little more time to still themselves. *[This is cultural today; church was different fifty years ago.]* Then we sing a hymn of praise and focus, hear God's Word, and pray again for the community. Although there are moments of stillness on Sundays, the beauty of stillness God calls us to is private, done in solitude; it is a conversation without spoken words between you and God. Think of what we've discussed so far since mid-January; recall Creator God and all he's made: the heavens, earth, seas, skies, stars, and all wondrous things, even humans.

Some people fear the thoughts that come with stillness; they cannot imagine beauty in that silence. Richard Foster's classic book, *Celebration of Discipline*, speaks of St. John of the Cross's words "dark night of the soul," that brings about emotional fears and psychological lostness. But

he argues that in reality, it is in that dark night of the soul that we hear God best and loudest, so there should be no fear, only courage and clarity. The beauty comes in the morning as does the joy when we face those fears. The Revelation passage is Christ reminding the church at Ephesus to preserve and not lose sight of God's love, their first love! Because of their hard work and perseverance, they felt success in sharing the Gospel, but their results became more important than their relationship with God. It is in stillness that a relationship with God, our first love, can be restored and refreshed. Don't hear the critical tone of Revelation 2:4, but hear the nurturing maternal voice of Christ saying, "come home!" Get still, read the Scriptures, listen for my encouragement, and feel the love that never left you even in the busy-ness of life and death, sickness and health. Remember your first love; in that love is beauty beyond compare to anything we see with our eyes.

A summary from Makoto Fujimura's book, *Culture Care*, I have referenced before:

A Christian understanding of beauty begins with the recognition that God does not need us, or the creation. Beauty is a gratuitous gift of the creator God . . . beauty is not necessary to our daily survival, [yet] it is still necessary for our flourishing. Our sense of beauty and our creativity are central to what it means to be made in the image of a creative God . . . This is why our soul hungers for beauty.

That hunger is satisfied in **stillness** to recognize the visual beauty around us and the relational beauty of God with us and within us. His presence can be felt only in this discipline of stillness, silence, and solitude. Amen.

|| *Let us pray.*

Beautiful God, we thank you for the discipline of solitude, silence, and stillness for reflection and reconnection. We get overwhelmed by our schedules of appointments, chores, family needs, and social activities. Help us to use this time of Lent to build gentle, healthy boundaries around our time. Be with us in our daytimes and in our dark nights of the soul. You are our first love. May we pray in Jesus' name, **Amen**.