

From Loneliness to Solitude

1 Kings 19:9-18

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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⁹At that place Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' ¹⁰He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

"God said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' ¹⁴He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.' (NRSV)

I

About thirty years ago, I began my first pastoral assignment at Lombard Mennonite Church, in Lombard, Illinois. Back then I was an assistant pastor working under the supervision of the two senior pastors, Joe and Emma Richards. One morning in the church office, Joe announced that after lunch, he and I were going to visit a retired woman in the congregation whom we'll call Mary.

When we arrived at Mary's condo, Joe, as the senior pastor, took the initiative in the conversation. He asked how she was doing. "Oh, I'm fine," she said. In large part she was telling the truth: she had a comfortable home, a comfortable retirement portfolio, and lots of friends at church. Yet Joe knew, as we all did, that Mary's husband had recently died and her children lived far away. So Joe gently probed a little more. "Really,

Mary, how are you?” Finally she admitted that she was lonely. Life was good, but she struggled with feelings of loneliness.

Since that pastoral visit thirty years ago, I’ve heard many people talk about feeling lonely. I’ve heard it from widows and widowers, from single people, from younger people and older people, from rich and poor, from separated and divorced people, and yes, even from people who are currently married. Anyone can feel lonely.

During the sabbatical that you generously gave me this summer, I wanted to learn more about the difference between loneliness and solitude. Loneliness is an experience we don’t like and try to avoid. When we’re lonely, we feel we don’t have enough meaningful contact with other people. Perhaps we want more friends than we currently have. If we have 10 friends, we wish we had 20. Maybe we just want more intimate friendships. We want to know and be known in deep and satisfying ways. Or maybe we’re looking for just one person who will know us and love us thoroughly. North American culture tries to convince us that if we can marry that one special, perfect person, we will no longer be lonely. North American culture says a spouse will make us happy and give us all the intimacy we want. But as most people know who are or were married, that may or may not happen in marriage. Marriage does not guarantee our loneliness will magically vanish.

II

Loneliness is something we run away from. By contrast, solitude is something we welcome. In solitude, we are content with being alone. For example, you relax alone for fifteen minutes on your front porch, savoring a cup of coffee and enjoying the birds. Or during the twenty-minute commute to work, you turn the radio off and allow yourself to sink into the silence. Or while working alone in your garden, solitude becomes your companion. Or perhaps you spend a day at home alone, or you live alone, and your home becomes a bright womb of solitude. During these times of solitude, you are calm, content, and at peace.

So how can we move from loneliness toward solitude? What helps us to embrace solitude and appreciate its charms?

III

A clue lies in the stories about Elijah, who spent much of his life living alone. So far as we know, he never married and never had children. He obviously had a biological mother and father, but the Bible tells us nothing about them or any of his relatives. He did not seem to have any intimate friends. The stories portray him as a person who usually lived alone. We might call him a solitary—a solitary deeply committed to the ways of God.

In our text for today, Elijah feels lonely. We know he feels lonely because he complains to God about it, moaning that he's the only one left in all of Israel who is still faithful to God. This may be one of the worst kinds of loneliness anyone could feel—that you're the only person left in the whole world who still cares about the God of heaven and earth.

At this low moment, God comes to Elijah in the sound of sheer silence, and it is this experience that turns Elijah's loneliness into solitude. In the wake of this sheer silence, God informs Elijah that there are still 7,000 people in Israel who never bowed to Baal or kissed his statue. 7,000 people! Elijah is not alone at all! Instead he's part of a grand company, an extensive network of people who revere God as much as Elijah does.

From this point forward, Elijah no longer feels sorry for himself. The presence of God, conveyed to him through silence, gives Elijah a sense of being in communion with God. He no longer feels lonely. He now knows that he lives and moves and has his being in God (cf. Acts 17:28). He now experiences the fullness and richness of solitude.

IV

The difference between loneliness and solitude is captured in one word: God. In loneliness, we usually are not in conscious communion with God. But in solitude, we sense ourselves to be in the presence of God, whether the Creator, Christ, or Holy Spirit.

Many years ago in one of the congregations I worked in, I visited a widow who is now dead. I'll call her Emma. Emma had been baptized as a teenager and spent her whole life in the church, doing the usual things people did in those days: she married, had children, attended church several times a week, prayed at mealtimes, and read the Bible. For a long time, that was enough. But during mid-life, Emma's sense of God dried up. She became thirsty for God, believing God surely had more for her than the lonely wilderness she was experiencing.

A turning point came when she became better acquainted with the Holy Spirit. This was new. Until then, she felt like she knew both Christ and the Creator. But now she was getting to know and experience the Spirit. This didn't happen overnight, but over time, she came to a deep and nearly continuous awareness that the Spirit accompanied her at every moment.

When her husband died, Emma was left to live alone in her home. But she was not lonely. "There are some advantages to living alone," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "You can talk to God out loud without bothering anyone else." Prayer turned into an activity she did numerous times throughout the day, sometimes out loud and sometimes in silence, sometimes while washing her dishes or ironing her clothes. "God is so alive in my home!" she said. "The light of the Spirit fills me with joy and amazement."

Emma's story illustrates how becoming consciously aware of the presence of God can nudge us from loneliness into solitude.

V

You might think solitude is just for introverts, but that's not actually true. Two of the most well-known spiritual writers of our time, both strong extroverts, have passionately pursued solitude. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who died in 1968, had a nearly insatiable desire for solitude. Yet he was an extrovert. Richard Rohr, well known for his books and public speaking, has been extroverted all his life, and yet for many years now he has lived alone in a hermitage in New Mexico because of his deep desire for experiencing God in solitude. Solitude is available to anyone.

VI

Let us assume you are interested in moving from loneliness to solitude. What steps can you take to help make that possible? What facilitates solitude in which the presence of God becomes possible? I have three modest suggestions.

First, take steps to reduce noise in your life. Strictly speaking, silence is not necessary in order to experience solitude, but it definitely helps.

Second, limit your intake of TV, movies, and perhaps also the news. When Emma told me her story, she emphasized how crucial this was. As she reduced her exposure to TV, God became more real. And as God became more real in the solitude of her home, she became less interested in watching TV at all.

Third, find meaningful ways to open yourself to God. Usually this means some form of prayer. Like Emma, for you it might simply be talking out loud to God. You could also write to God on paper. Or if you'd rather be silent and listen, you can try things like centering prayer, walking a labyrinth, or listening to quiet, reflective music. Praying with scripture is another way to open yourself to God.

Opening yourself to God isn't complicated. In May as part of the sabbatical, I lived alone in a hermitage for 25 days. Occasionally I talked to God, but mostly I just listened. It helps to have a relaxed attitude about the whole thing. I went just to be with God. I didn't ask God for anything, expect anything, or demand anything. There were no visions, no fireworks, no dramatic events. I mostly tried to be present to God's presence, alive to God's life, and silent with God's own ineffable silence.

In solitude, we discover that we are never alone, because we are gifted with God's presence. In the grace of God, may your loneliness shift into solitude.