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Mark 1:35

In the Christian tradition, the season of Advent begins four Sundays before December 25th and ends on Christmas Eve. For those who observe this feast, the anticipation of the coming incarnate presence of God through the birth of Jesus can be a time of great solemnity as well as joy. It is also a time of increased busyness with preparations for holiday celebrations, family gatherings, and other end-of-the-year events – on top of full work lives – looming. Despite being a season of joy, these added hours of activity and movement can be disquieting, transforming joyful waiting into harried impatience.

How can we better prepare for the season and, for that matter, better prepare for life? In his sermon meditation on Mark 1:32-39, Dutch-born writer and priest, Henri Nouwen, offers a suggestion: find your “lonely place” for solitude. Nouwen points out that the passage in Mark, speaks to our need for a quiet centering.

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The peacefulness that Jesus sought in his lonely place is thrown into sharp contrast by the gospel account of events that took place both earlier that day and the activities anticipated for the day that followed. Jesus had spent all day teaching and healing in the synagogue and, after he left to go the home of one of his disciples, he continued to be called on to provide healing for a family member. Even at the end of the day after sundown “the whole town came gathered at the door” bringing even more people who were in need of healing.

Nouwen reflects on this before and after: “Surrounded by hours of moving, we find a moment of quiet stillness. In the heart of much involvement, there are words of withdrawal... And after much togetherness, there is solitude.” It is this “lonely place” of centering and replenishment, Nouwen believes, that was the secret of Jesus’ ministry – the source of the courage that allowed him to reveal the healing presence of God and the fountain of resilience that enabled him to continue on the next day to neighboring towns continuing the work of proclaiming God’s message.

Nouwen’s sermon reveals one of the great paradoxes – that we may be most connected, creative, and of greater service to others when we take time for moments of aloneness. In those times of solitude and rest we can reconnect with what matters most to us, which in turn can cultivate the resilience that allows us to carry on. The message is timely today – without a quiet center, we risk missing the anticipatory joy that the Advent season invites us to enter.

From Henri Nouwen’s book, *Out of Solitude*

How might this year be different? During this season, amidst your actions and concerns of the day, can you find moments of quiet stillness – that careful balance between withdrawal and involvement, distance and closeness, solitude and community that can become a source of inner calm and joy?