

Evensong is experienced through silence, quiet, reflection. The service demands a devotional heart, carving time out of the dusk to ruminate on things past, to bathe in the promise of things to come, to observe light and to disarm the terrors of looming darkness. This cloistered time provides a perfect opportunity to celebrate the complexities of church.

Tonight we are lifting up Heidi's call to a ministry and a change in composition for St. Benedict's...by gathering together and by being truly present in this prayerful moment. We also are welcoming the Holy Spirit's true...calming...unhurried...introspective nature. Yet, we still join to rejoice in a new beginning. Like all Christian endeavors, we are trying to balance the erupting joy of the Gospel story with the calm needed to hear the whisper of God's voice in the wind. What we seek is a state of excited stillness.

I first met Heidi at an Evensong, or rather the community meal following an Evensong. I remember being distraught. My relationship with the church seemed far from fair at that moment and I was feeling vulnerable, unappreciated, unloved and decidedly uncalled. I had plodded my way to dinner following a service where I had failed to be soothed. We sat together in the refectory at Seabury Western Theological Seminary, she was present; I was deflated.

Now, looking for pastoral care from fellow seminarians is generally not recommended. One of the professors at Seabury is fond of saying, "Seminarians are desperate to practice pastoral care in the worst way, and usually do." But there was something about that moment that made it impossible to keep my disappointment to myself. Maybe I had received news from my Bishop about some setback in my timeline to priesthood that afternoon. Maybe the stress of returning to school was amplifying my frustration with the hurry-up-not-yet of preparation for ordained ministry. I can't quite remember. But, I do remember feeling totally at ease sharing my worries with this stranger, with Heidi. As we spoke that evening, it was evident to me that she had brought the energy from the Evensong with her into that conversation. She listened and prayed with and for me in excited stillness. I was calmed and encouraged.

This story is not just an endorsement of the exceptional qualities of my friend Heidi as a pastoral counselor. While she certainly has those skills, and I am confident that they will be evident in her ministry here at St. Benedict's; I am focusing, tonight, instead on the power of presence, being open to the transformation of quiet. It is in the quiet that God will move through us and give us strength enough to face the multitude of struggles that lie ahead. What better covenant could you make together, at the outset of this new journey, than to promise to be prayerful together?

The stories we read this evening begin alike, well sort of alike. Both Moses and Jesus seek out God, an intimate conversation. Jesus treks into the desert, led by the Holy Spirit, and meets temptation there. And, Moses comes to God with lament, in despondency. For me, there is real comfort in the gritty realism of both these attempts at excited stillness. Moses cries out in complaint against his charges, the mewling Israelites, in one of the funniest and most relatable quotes in the Bible, "Did I give birth to them, that you say to me 'carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a sucking child?'" And Jesus' one-on-one with Satan, I presume, is reminiscent of all our daily struggles against our baser addictions. If they were both cherubic when coming to God or only met angels to soothe their sorrows in the desert, we would feel inadequate thinking

that we have to be perfect before entering into worship and quietness. Or, we would feel despondent when coming to worship only to meet temptation.

Despite what happens in those desert places, God comes to them. To Moses, God promises to divide his burden of leadership among seventy elders. To Jesus, God sends angels to sustain him after his arduous encounter. If they had not come in excited stillness, if they had not encountered excited stillness there...they assuredly met God there in the desert and were able to leave in excited stillness.

As the parallel continues, both return, with God at their back, to share the news with their neighbors. And those neighbors fall into two classic mistakes for congregations when encountering a commissioning from God.

Moses comes back to find, to his delight, that there are others who are ready to be transformed through a sharing of the spirit of Jehovah. In one of the first recorded tent revivals, Moses gathered the crowd of seventy elders together to wait for God to come down in a cloud. But two of the seventy prophets-to-be didn't make it to the tent on time and were struck with the prophetic gift in the middle of camp. What could they do? They set up soapboxes in middle of "tent town-square" and went to prophesying. Now Joshua, in a classic move of clericalism, came to Moses to complain. He said, "We can't have everyone prophesying out there, we have to keep that to the special chosen guys like us, right? Want me to go and quiet them?" But Moses knew better, he was elated to have the sole burden of the prophet lifted from him and rightly said, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!"

You know, Joshua was half right. It makes for a messier church, giving everyone the commission to submit to God's spirit in their lives. But the messy truth is...leadership in God's church doesn't reside in one person; not in the warden, not in the priest, not even in the Bishop. God in Christ Jesus is the head of our church and everyone gathered is charged to be transformed by that reality through the presence of the Spirit. How we organize the church is reflective of the disbursement of gifts of the Spirit, not in God's level of desired intimacy.

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Jesus came back from the desert ready to start his ministry. He was making his way through Galilee, preaching, teaching and doing miracles. After a short time, in his circuit, he found himself back home in Nazareth. There he chose an interesting tactic. He knew that his parent's friends and childhood chums would "Ooo" and "Ahh" at what he was doing. They would want to pump his hand and say, "Nice sermon, preach." And give him a slap on the back or a jab in the ribs, knowingly. Even worse, the news had traveled of his miraculous signs and they were likely hoping to get a discount because they used to be friends. But with Jesus reordering family, there was a necessity for the crowds to understand that this shift in covenant was not something you could be grandfathered into. Transformation was required. He had been transformed, or rather was living into his identity as example for us of how to be transformed. He required that, even his old neighbors, were to be transformed. They were perplexed by this, so he launched into two clarifying stories.

He retold one story about Elijah and one about Elisha. Let me refresh your memory of these stories. Elijah was sent by God to be taken care of by a Sidonian widow during a drought. She shared the little she had with the prophet even though he was a stranger. During that time, her son died leaving her destitute. She thought that Elijah's God had cursed her, so Elijah raised the boy from the dead as a sign of God's commitment to her. Then Jesus told the story of how Elisha was asked by Naaman, a commander of the armies of Aram, to heal him of his leprosy. Naaman had learned about the prophet from a Jewish slave girl who knew of Elisha's miracles. By all accounts he was an enemy of Israel. So, the commander came with gifts and bribes, but all Elisha wanted was for him to humble himself by washing in the river. To make matters worse, Gehazi, Elisha's servant thought better of the deal and went after a healed Naaman to demand some of the payment that his master didn't accept. The greedy Gehazi was stricken with Naaman's leprosy as judgment.

Now, the people of Nazareth were quite familiar with these stories and were not dense to get Jesus' meaning. He was looking for a showing of devotion, like the generous widow or the humbled commander. It didn't matter that they were Jesus' old pals. He wanted them to be transformed. In the stories, they could tell that Jesus was more likely comparing them to the greedy servant Gehazi. This made them angry enough to try to kill him, their once friend and neighbor, because all they could see was a smug hometown boy who wouldn't share his new found talent.

I often hear this story being interpreted as, "You can't go home again." And, that does have a certain ring of truth to it. For instance, it is amazing how I regress to the relationship I had with my parents when I was a teen as soon as I come home for the holidays, much to my wife's dismay.

Yet, the real problem was that the people of Nazareth were incapable of seeing Jesus as a prophet because they didn't believe in his transformation, and were not willing to do any changing themselves. When he tried to clarify through stories suggesting that intimacy with God and healing came after acknowledgements like faithfulness and goodness, they were stunned and obstinate. How many gatherings of Christians operate on the same surface level, never willing to commit to more than superficial change?

I have only really focused on two of the three stories in God's Word tonight. The third story is one that I have a harder time telling. Because, well, it is your story. The third story is St. Benedict's all the good work you have already done that needs to be strengthened and how you might be transformed in the future. Though you have begun your journey already, tonight we liturgically commemorate the change...reflect and prepare. You and Heidi are together in that prayerful state before you are asked to be altered together through the Spirit. In excited stillness tonight, and hopefully in many nights to come, you crane your ears and listen for the direction that God is calling you to take this community of Christians. None of you have to be perfect going in; Moses wasn't perfect. In the middle of the searching you will likely be tested, Jesus had to grapple with his greatest temptations before beginning his ministry. God will be there with you in the quiet and will be with you still when prayer turns to witness and ministry.