

The Stillness of Compassion

It's time to slow down. You're in the right place. We are doing something very countercultural during this Advent season, and it's this: carving time out of a hectic, fast-paced season to be still. And this stillness is not only a matter of ceasing activity, but also a matter of practicing stillness in the presence of God, and in the quiet, letting Him speak to us.

At the beginning of this Advent season, I would also gently suggest that you think about ways of defending your time, or at least using it as wisely as possible. Maybe you don't really have to accept every invitation you receive; maybe you don't have to buy a gift for every person in your address book. Or, maybe the first times you reserve on your calendar are those that are reserved for devotional time with God. I think the chances of you doing that are actually pretty high; after all, you blocked out the time to be here this morning. The point is, Advent is supposed to be a time for contemplation and reflection on the unfolding story of Jesus. Somewhere along the way it has become a season of distraction, and who do you think is responsible for that?

So, I encourage you to remove from your mind your to-do list; acknowledge the stress that the season may be already causing you, and having acknowledged it, set it aside for a moment. If you have any guilt about not spending enough time in conversation with God, acknowledge that too, and quietly bring it to Jesus. Leave the distractions and focus your eyes on the cross of Christ. What do you see? The body is removed, the blood washed away and what remains is a stillness: a stillness of peace, and calm, and love. What remains is God's compassion. A forgiving grace that pulls you into his arms.

Over the next three weeks we will lean into the stillness of the cross through several unexpected passages. We will recount the suffering and death of Jesus but through the lens of Christmas and the infant Christ. We will journey to the manger but at the same time also journey to the cross. Yes, we are travelling to Bethlehem. But Jesus did not stay in Bethlehem. His destination was Golgotha, the hill of the skull, and a garden tomb.

He wasn't far from that destination in this conversation with Pilate and Jesus. Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so."³ And the chief priests accused him of many things.⁴ And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you."⁵ But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

Can you picture this? Even before the morning sun, the air was thick with anticipation, stress, and activity. There was movement everywhere, from everyone. The chief priests were seeking testimony from anyone who might know Jesus, the witnesses were entering and exiting the courtyard, the scribes were busy recording the proceedings, the elders were consulting with the priests, and all, including the guards were spitting on Him and striking him and yelling "Prophecy!" And as the sun rose this activity didn't subside; it just moved to Pilate. And there the chief priests accused Jesus and Pilate joined in demanding a response from Him. And in all this commotion Jesus remained silent. At this moment he could have called his army of angels who would have descended to Earth and destroyed the Roman army. Not a soldier would've

been left alive, not one. At this moment Jesus could have saved himself. He could have walked right out of that room and ascended up to heaven. At that moment Jesus could have done anything He wanted, and He did exactly what he wanted: he remained still; he remained silent.

In the stillness of his silence, he showed them compassion. He showed them, and us, and the entire world that he came to save, not to destroy; that he came to seek, not to scatter. Through the stillness of his compassion he would ransom us from the futile ways inherited from our forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with his precious blood. He ransomed us with his precious blood, and to do it, he held still.

In stillness, Jesus does not repay humanity—he does not repay you as your sins deserve. He looks into the open book of your life, and sees everything, and he can do anything He wants. But no punishment will fall on you. In compassion and stillness, Jesus directs the punishment to fall on Him. He stays on the cross for this very reason.

In Jesus's sacrifice is also the hope of our own compassionate response. In other words, as we have received mercy from Jesus, we are called to give mercy in Jesus—to be merciful people. When someone does you wrong, you have choices. You can strike back twice as hard and inflict as much damage as possible—or you can harness the stillness of compassion. The compassion of Jesus can become the compassion you tap into, so that you do not repay others with revenge but with mercy. The devil and the world scream, “lash out.” Jesus whispers, “be still.”

At this time, we are going to practice stillness in the presence of God. I'm going to give you one silent minute, and in that minute I would just like you to reflect on the compassion Jesus has shown the world. He was still when he could have run away, still when he could have retaliated, still when he could have brought righteous punishment to bear. In what ways do you need the stillness of compassion to descend upon your heart? We'll take that minute now, and then I will conclude with a prayer.