

The Stillness of Control

Have you ever tried to stand still on one foot for any amount of time? To be still requires control, and control requires strength. When you start to think that through, it is somewhat obvious I guess, but there are numerous ways that it applies. If you've ever tried to hold a kite still in a strong wind, you know that stillness requires control which requires strength. Or if you've ever had someone say something to you that is just outrageously hurtful, and you bit your tongue or tried to respond in a calm, reasonable manner, you know that stillness requires control which requires strength. Even the spiritual stillness we are trying to cultivate during this Advent season is something that needs to be defended. Just putting this time on your calendar requires control which requires strength—the strength of saying 'no' to other things in order to say 'yes' to this time with God. And, of course, there is one place where we see this principle with stunning clarity, and that is the cross of Jesus. Jesus' stillness on the cross required control which required strength. It was not weakness that held Jesus to the cross, but the strength of His conviction that this was His Father's will; that this was what was necessary to reconcile people to God. It is the mystery of what's expressed in Hebrews 12:2, where it says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

What is very strange is that we do not always recognize control or strength when we see it. As an example, we turn to today's reading from Mark: "There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome." Mark notes that these women were not close to the action. From where they stood, they probably couldn't see the pain on Jesus' face or the details of his disfigured body. We don't know how far away they were, but even if they had been standing at the very foot of the cross, the last thing they would've thought was that Jesus was in control of the situation. It looked like just the opposite. It looked like a horrible end to what had been a hopeful life.

And if we allow ourselves to be candid, we might admit that there are situations in our own lives that we look at and regard as out of control. The circumstances pile up, and from our vantage point, we find it hard to believe that there is a way forward and can even doubt (or forget) that God is ordering everything for good. It's human to do so, to be sure; not our best moments, and very revealing of the condition of our hearts. How easily do we misread the signs: in the quiet and stillness we think nothing is happening—we read it as 'God's not doing anything.' Not to put words in their mouths, but I imagine Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses and Salome felt the same way as they watched Jesus dying from a distance.

But in the stillness of the moment, there is the potential for a breakthrough. The Holy Spirit can communicate a simple truth to you. That truth is: you don't know everything that God knows. He sees all the pieces and knows how they all fit together in a way that you and I could never begin to. We often don't recognize God's control when we see it; if we did, we wouldn't

worry as we do. But God is faithful, and He is working at a level far beyond yours or mine to accomplish what He wants for you. And in time, He will give you the grace to see it.

Again, it's at the cross of Jesus that this all locks into place. What everyone thought was a complete loss of control—the crucifixion of Jesus—was in fact the ultimate act of self-control and obedient strength. In time, Jesus' followers would not only come to understand this, but to depend on it, to put all of their weight on it, to trust that Jesus' death on the cross was not a tragic mistake but a once-and-for-all sacrifice that had been the plan all along. It's not just remarkable that they came to that conclusion; that's a miracle. It is the miracle of faith. This deep trust in God is a gift, fanned into flame by the Holy Spirit, bestowed in baptism, nurtured by a diet of God's Word and the sacramental body and blood of Jesus. And in the stillness of our devotional moments, this all comes flooding back in, refreshing our hearts, renewing our minds, grounding us in Jesus' action and activity. Which, by the way, is ongoing—his activity, I mean. Jesus is still on His mission and we have been recruited to join him. But that's really a message for another time. For this morning, it is enough for us to take these silent moments we need to let the gospel hit bottom in our souls, to think it through our minds; to pray it through our hearts; to learn to really rest in the redemption Jesus purchased with His sacrificial death and risen life.

Two weeks from today, we'll be celebrating the birth of this redeemer. Through song and sacrament and the ancient words of the gospel we will be brought into the stillness of the Bethlehem stable. Now it's true, stables are not always perfectly silent places, but if you can imagine it's the middle of the night, Mary is exhausted, Joseph is watching over her and this little baby boy, now born into the world. Angels have told both of them that He is the Son of the Most High God, and now, here he is, and groups of people will show up not just to say congratulations, but to worship the little one. Worship always involves bringing a gift, I know you know that. The shepherds didn't have much to give besides their praises. That was fine. The magi will end up bringing gifts fit for a king. And it just makes me wonder, what gift would I bring to Jesus...what gift will you bring?

What if I gave Him control—control over my life? I think that's what it should be. I hand it to him because I know that I can't calm my own troubles, I can't quiet my own shame, I can't bring peace to my own turbulent life. I hand it to him because I trust that He will bring the comfort and the stillness that I'm searching for. What about you?

As we did last week, we're going to take one silent minute to practice stillness in the presence of God. In the silence, I encourage to think about the control and strength of Jesus, and what control you might need to hand over to him. After a minute, I'll close in prayer.