

**“Never Alone”**  
**John 1:43-51; Psalm 139:1-18**  
*Second Sunday after the Epiphany; January 17, 2021*

Winter brings a sense of loneliness in many people. The richness of the green leaves and the vitality of plants are gone during the winter.



The beautiful foliage is gone with trees laid bare as the cold northern wind blows upon them.

As a young boy I felt sorry for trees. I still do. While summer is characterized by the growth and expansion of all things, autumn is marked by decay. But it is also the time when fruits ripen and then the harvest. The ripened fruit separate themselves from the trees and fall to the ground. The separation makes them lonely. The trees that drop their fruit are also lonely. And then comes winter. This season is the loneliest because it is marked by the cessation of all things. It is a time of silence and contemplation.

Our families are similar to the changing seasons. When we are children, we are like the tiny green fruits that are tightly connected to the trees. Children and parents are tightly connected together, so that neither

is lonely as long as they are together. The period of childhood can be compared to the spring season. In spring the fruits are born from the flowers. As the fruits grow and expand in the summer, so the children grow to become youths. The period of youth can be compared to the summer season. Then when the children are fully grown up, they start to leave home. The maturity of children can thus be compared to autumn. When the children depart from home they leave their parents alone. This separation makes grown-up children and parents lonely. Loneliness, then, is an inherent part of the process of growth and maturation.

Our society today, as it becomes chronologically older, is also characterized by a sense of loneliness. Back in the day most people had honorable work to diligently develop the social and economic conditions in which to live. This was a period of toil, with its physical stresses and strains. Most of you remember it well. Many will say that our society today has reached the winter of discontent with its decay and cessation. For most Americans their standard of living has declined and our nation's political power in the world has diminished. The powers of

scientific technology may have eliminated a lot of our physical pain and suffering, but they have also created a society in which loneliness and alienation have become real problems. Our lives are characterized by loneliness because we are like the ripened fruits that have fallen from the tree down to the ground.

Almost everywhere there are people with smartphones which seem to be growing out of the palms of their hands. The need for information on demand is actually as primitive an instinct as any animal can have. Smartphones, social media, et cetera, are a way of keeping contact with someone, anyone, who will reassure persons that he or she is not alone. You may think they are trying to look like a more important person, but deep down they are checking on their existence. It is being alone that we cannot stand. And for many people, being alone really means being without Mommy. A Freudian would say that iPhones and other such devices are a way of regaining the steady, comforting beat from the lullabies of infancy. It is a pretty shabby way to regain maternal



comfort, but it makes sense. After all, we were born connected. At birth, the cord got cut. Loneliness came with maturity.

As our society has become allegedly more efficient and mature, we have valued individualism and privacy while ironically giving it away. But regardless, individualism and privacy presuppose independence and separation, which are the cause of loneliness. If loneliness, however, is a by-product of maturity and independence, it should not be regarded as purely negative. Loneliness can, in fact, be more positive than negative in its impact on us. To be sure, loneliness can be destructive when it is



taken negatively, when it is mixed with fear — which can mutate into anger and then into hatred. And this is sadly what has become of us in our divided, increasing violent nation — a bunch of lonely people attacking each other.

For such reasons, I would like to suggest that loneliness can also be constructive when it is taken positively. Let us look, then, at the positive value of loneliness from a Christian perspective.

As we look at the life of our Lord Jesus, we can see that it was a lonely one. He was born in the village of Bethlehem, which was not even the hometown of his parents. He was born not only in an alien town, but also of a young mother who was not married. Jesus was, without doubt, ridiculed by his peers in the small and conservative town of Nazareth. And as Nathanael — identified by Jesus as “a real Israelite. Genuine through and through” — would contemptuously say, “Are you telling me that something good can come out of Nazareth?” We will come back to Nathanael in a moment.

Although we know little of Jesus’s early life, we do know that at age 12 he was with the elders and learned men in the Temple discussing interpretations of the scriptures. Perhaps, because of this, Jesus felt closer to older people than to his own peers. Like many precocious children who lack friends of their own age, Jesus often found himself alone. Moreover, he felt the need to spend many years all by himself in meditation and prayer. We know from at least three of the gospels that Jesus spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness immediately after his baptism by John the Baptizer. Although people started to follow Jesus

when he began his ministry, they did not understand him or share their feelings with him as a friend. Even his closest disciples failed to understand him. He did not have his own family. He was homeless. He was alone much of the time.

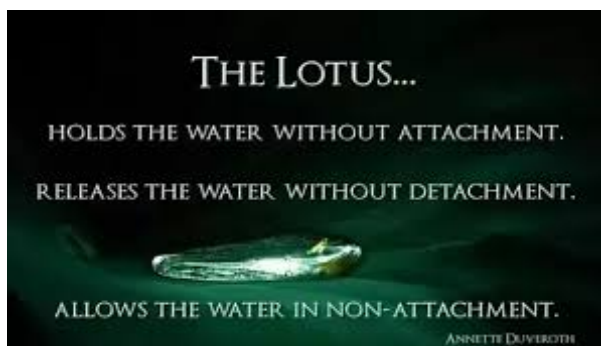


Jesus could not rely on anyone. We remember his agony and loneliness in Gethsemane. He was totally betrayed. When he was accused, no one sided with him or defended him. He was rejected and scoffed at by the establishment. Those who had followed him during his ministry became bystanders as he was tortured and nailed to the cross. Thus, Jesus said, “Look here: the time is coming (in fact, it’s now arrived!) when you will be scattered, each of you to your own place. You will leave me alone...” (John 16:32). Certainly Jesus was a lonely man when he walked this earth. He was the “man of sorrows” predicted by Isaiah the prophet (53:3).

But Jesus was not a lonely man in the ultimate sense. He said, “... I’m not alone because the father is with me.” If loneliness is the feeling

of being alone, Jesus was not a lonely person because of his fellowship with his Heavenly Father. Jesus dearly loved the Psalms and prayed them intensely, so it is not hard to imagine him as being reassured by Psalm 139 that even when we feel abandoned, we are never really alone. God is with us, now and always: “You [God] hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me” (v. 5).

A Korean pastor once pointed to me that the detachment of Jesus from the world was also his attachment to the kingdom of God. A Buddhist or a Taoist, the Korean pastor said, would say that detachment



is also attachment. Jesus’s detachment from the people expressed his loneliness, but his attachment to his Heavenly Father implied togetherness. And so it can be said that Jesus’s loneliness was also a togetherness, just as his detachment was also an attachment. Likewise, although Jesus had few friends, he became a friend to all. In a way, Jesus’s detachment was necessary in order to attach himself totally to the world. Perhaps this is why the resurrected Christ said to Mary

Magdalene, “Don’t cling to me,” when she reached out to embrace him (John 20:17).

We can learn a lot by looking at scripture with more than just western eyes. I would suggest that this is the kind of paradox through which we can learn to overcome our loneliness. “Follow me,” Jesus tells us. As Christians we are asked to follow the way of Christ. We are asked to bear the cross by ourselves without depending upon the assistance of others. To bear the cross alone means to stand alone through trials and tribulation. As followers of Christ, we must not shun loneliness. For Christians, loneliness is, in fact, an opportunity to be with Christ, just as it was for Jesus and the psalmist to be with the Father. In loneliness we can turn our thoughts inward. Being solitary affords us the time to detach our obsessions from the external things that detract our thoughts from God and his kingdom. It is our loneliness that yields us a profound sense of detachment from the world, which in turn is the means for a greater attachment to the world and its needs than ever before. Therefore, we should not be ashamed of being alone.



Somehow, even before COVID-19 social distancing, we came to be afraid of the loneliness in our lives. We do not like to sit alone. We do not want people to presume we have no friends. I have known people who have withdrawn from the life of the church after their spouse had died. There are singles who feel like they are a “third wheel.” People who never marry are considered to be odd. Many of us are afraid of loneliness and try to avoid it at all costs. It is especially true of people who feel compelled to do bizarre things they do not really want to do because of loneliness. When someone acts rude or mean-spirited, I will generally think that deep down that person is lonely. Their Twitter or Facebook feeds will usually confirm my observation. I feel pity for such people. Loneliness can be such a malignant force if we yield to it. It can wield great power over us if we are ashamed of being alone.

We must learn to be unashamed of being alone. Through loneliness we learn to depend on God. The psalm-writer says, “If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the furthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast” (Psalm 139:9-10). Loneliness can be a grace that keeps us humbly

aware of our insufficiency. The human soul yearns for God whether we consciously know this or not. Loneliness is the feeling of the incompleteness of



the self due to our separation from God. The cause of our separation from God is sin, and loneliness is the by-product of that separation. We know from the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis that Adam and Eve's loneliness began only after their departure from the Garden of Eden. Before they left there, they were at one with God and in community with God. But then they sinned. And that is where the loneliness started. It was that sin which separated us, and that separation makes us feel lonely.

Therefore, the remedy for loneliness is to be found only in our relationship with God. Only when detaching ourselves from human selfishness, which separates us from the world, can we find real fellowship with God. This fellowship alone is the Christian solution to the problem of loneliness. Jesus has demonstrated the way to solve this

problem through his own detachment from a superficial, fallen, very tragic world and his attachment to the far more real kingdom of God.

So how does this apply to you and me? Back to Nathaniel: “Are you telling me that something good can come out of Nazareth?” Can you detect anger in Nathaniel’s voice? Perhaps it was a scared, lonely man’s resignation. Why was Nathaniel all alone under the fig tree that day when Jesus saw him? Was he grieving? Had he been rejected? Did someone’s callous words or action deny him a sense of human dignity?



All these detachments and more seem to have been the case for the psalm-writer, but for Nathaniel we do not know for sure.

But what we do know is Nathanael’s awe about Jesus’s knowledge of him before they had even met, “Rabbi...you’re the son of God! You’re the king of Israel!” Such a response to Jesus’s knowledge makes sense only in light of Psalm 139. Only God could have such knowledge. Nathanael reaches the right conclusion: Jesus is the son of God. And

what does Jesus say to him? “Wait a minute... Are you telling me that you believe just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You’ll see a lot more than that!... You’ll see heaven opened, and God’s angels ascending and descending on the son of man.”

Can you hear Jesus saying similar words to you, especially whenever it is that you feel detached, fallen to the ground, and decaying — lonely? “I’m telling you the solemn truth,” Jesus says.

Have you noticed the holy moment?

When I first got a computer, which I have to say is still basically pagan, the spell-check program did not care for the word “sacred.” The program wanted to change the word “sacred” to the word “scared.” I know that feeling. I have it. You have it. Everyone in the Bible has it. They were very often “sore afraid” when they encountered the sacred:

the ark of the covenant, the burning bush, the angelic messenger, the authentic dream, Jesus himself with signs and wonders. In



many societies the act considering something being sacred also simultaneously makes it dangerous — you dare not touch it, name it,

analyze it, define it. There is a fear and a respect. The proper word is “awe.” The sacred is awful. It is full of awe. Since the fear of the Lord the beginning of maturity and wisdom, there is nothing wrong (indeed there is rather a lot that is okay) with this feeling, with being reminded of the grandeur, the otherness of almighty God, along with the tenderness and generosity. That is why loneliness is a Christian virtue. It transports our lives from the secular to the sacred level. Loneliness can break down the wall that separates us from God. It is, therefore, a means of grace and salvation. That does not mean that loneliness is easy. Look at Jesus — the loneliness man who ever walked on this planet.

Listen also to Jesus. “Follow me,” he says to you and me, “and



I’m going to show you some dangerous, sacred things, all of which point you to the kingdom of God right here, right now. I am with you. And so, are *you* with me?

We are in this together. Do not be scared. You will never be alone.”

Be silent. Contemplate the holy and the sacred. Be still and know  
that God is God. Amen.