

September 20, 2026
Paul Purdue preaching

It was an unusually cold fall day when I woke hours before sunrise. Wide awake, I made coffee and slipped out into the darkness. The predawn sky swirled with a slow moving masterpiece of grey clouds that obscured the last stars and hinted of rain. I walked down the farm lane, across frosty fields, and once my eyes adjusted to the nightscape I walked into the woods. A half mile from the barn, I heard the rain. Should I turn back? After the summer heat, the cold air somehow held me in place. I stopped and listened. I looked to the tree canopy for rain, I opened my hands to feel any rain. I waited, but the rain did not come. I could hear raindrops, but I remained dry, a tiny mystery; where was this rain? Do I turn on a flashlight? No, the night was too beautiful. I stood quieter yet. There was no rain, only the sound of a few millions leaves releasing their grip from the trees and falling to the forest floor. Did the cold night break those bonds, was the breeze just right, or was it just time? "Take off your shoes, you are on holy ground". I had stood still enough to realize I was standing on holy ground.

Mary Olliver in her poem "It Was Early" writes

*Sometimes I need
only to stand
wherever I am
to be blessed.*

Are we still enough to discover holy ground? The Psalmist gives us a frame to hold up and gaze upon our worlds:

*O give thanks to the Lord; call on God's name;
make known God's deeds among the peoples.
Sing to our creator, sing praises to the Lord;
tell of all God's wonderful works.
Glory in God's holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
Seek the Lord and his strength;
seek God's presence continually.
Remember the wonderful works of the Lord,
the miracles and the justice God declares*

How are you framing your world? Luke 4:16 tells us Jesus "*went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.*" The custom of Sabbath pulls us out of regular

time, inviting us into the holy: creation, community, our souls and God. I love that only a chapter later in Luke 5:16, we read *“Jesus would slip away to deserted places and pray.”* When do we slip away to find those holy places all around us?

Forty years before smartphones stole our attention, Thich Nhat Hahn was concerned about our ability to be present in the moment. Hahn cautions that our tendency to move on to the next task, thrill, or to-do steals our ability to find peace in the moment: to be present. *“If I am incapable of washing dishes joyfully, if I want to finish them quickly so I can go and have dessert, I will be equally incapable of enjoying my dessert. With the fork in my hand, I will be thinking about what to do next, and the texture and the flavor of the dessert, together with the pleasure of eating it, will be lost. I will always be dragged into the future, never able to live in the present moment.”* (Peace Is Every Step). We are distracted by the next step, the next notification, the next day, the next school, the next promotion, the next vacation, the next house, the next retirement, the next goal that we learn to enjoy the moment. How disruptive are phones to our prayers, our presence, our peace?

Jesus calls us into the present, *“Do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring worries of its own... First, seek God’s Kingdom.”* (Matthew 6)

Mark’s first chapter describes Jesus’ first day on the job. Jesus calls Peter, James and John, then *Heals Peter’s mother-in law and then* the flood gates open as hurting people line up all day. The next day *“Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. Peter tracked Jesus down and told Jesus, “Everyone’s looking for you!”*

Amy Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III write: *The people’s continual desire for (Jesus) - to listen to Jesus teachings, to touch him, to gain healing from him - tires him, and drains him. Jesus’s need for prayer and solitude can be recognized by anyone who works in health care, and particularly with people suffering chronic and painful conditions.... Jesus is fully human: he tires, he requires solitude, (Jesus) needs to rest.”* (The Gospel of Luke- a commentary) Do you sometimes feel like the world is closing in around you? Jesus would slip away to the deserted places and pray.

Luke 3 and 4 tells us *“When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While Jesus was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, my child, whom I dearly love; in you I delight.” ... Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted for forty days by the devil: the accuser, the adversary, old scratch. Alone, in a deserted*

place, away from carpentry, family, and the news, did Jesus ponder the baptism, his belovedness and a child of God? Jesus spent 40 days with his thoughts. Will Jesus use his power to feed himself or hungry people? Will I seek thrones, treasures or titles or seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God? Will we put on a big religious show or proclaim God's upside down Kingdom?

Sometimes when I am feeling overwhelmed, I slip away to deserted places and pray. I silence my phone, set it for 7 minutes, and pray. I say "*pray*", and I do pray, but in these prayers I simply sit still, listening, watching, opening myself to "*God's still small voice*". (KJV 1 Kings 19) I do not need the woods to find a holy place. My front porch is as holy as the Smokies. I slip away to our sanctuary and often marvel how the location of the sun changes our sainted glass windows. I sit on the church's steps, eyes wide open. I greet guests in new boots and hats with a warm "howdy". I smile as children skip ahead to arrive at Jenny's Ice Cream first. I pray for the drivers who block the intersection. These prayers are easier when I am not driving. My solitude helps me better connect with what I am feeling, that is almost always a comfort. Sometimes, I remember Jesus' confession "*my soul is overwhelmed*," Sometimes, I say with Mary, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, my soul rejoices in God, my Savior.*" Is it a little miracle that 7 minutes of silence brings clarity, faith, peace and love?

I have been doing this for years, I had to build up to 7 minutes, and could not do it in an airport at the start. You may have power through the boredom or the temptation to do some or look at your phone. Jesus invites us to slip away to the deserted place to pray, you do not need to drive an hour to find a sacred place, they are all around us.

Slipping away to pray, connects us with what is real, what we feel, the smell of the dish soap and flavor of the desert. Prayer reminds us who we are and that we are beloved. Let us establish Sabbath customs and learn how to slip away each morning, midweek and mid-day. Let us stop and reframe our worlds.

Oh, Give thanks to the Lord;

make known God's deeds.

Sing to our Creator, sing praises to the Lord;

tell of all God's wonderful works.

Glory in God's holy name;

let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.

Seek the Lord and God's strength;

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Amen.

