

TITLE: Static and Silence

Hello everyone, and welcome. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Josh Mendrala, I lead our college and YA ministries here at Summit Church and assist with our worship outreach. We are beginning a series this week on technology, which I think is something really important for us as a community of Believers to talk about, to discuss, and to explore. And to be honest, I think they asked me to preach this week partly because I am part of a generation that has grown up around this technology of connective media that surrounds us today.

Now it's so interesting to me how different generations have different relationships with this (pull out phone and display it, wow, amazing). See my experience growing up is divided by this thing. I grew up with this huge open space behind my house, my dad worked in software development, so we had one computer in the house. But up until I was about 13, many of my memories are of running outside, of getting lost and dirty and waiting to hear my mom yelling to come home, or keeping an eye out for when the street lights turned on. Yet, in my teen years, I was able to buy myself an iPhone, and was met with a whole new side of technology that I hadn't experienced.

Everything we could want to access now is just a tap away, whether it's benevolent or malevolent. We all experience feelings and urges that are commonplace as human beings, but we have never had to educate ourselves and train ourselves on our internal dialogue and agency more than right now.

I still remember, I think I was 14 years old, and my Dad found out I had been looking at pornography on my phone. And what was especially memorable about this was actually the intense kindness that my dad treated me with in this moment. I remember he handed me my phone, he told me that I had ten minutes to delete anything I wanted from it. I gave it to him, he installed some sort of protective software on it, and he gave it back to me.

There was no punishment, no yelling, no anger, not even disappointment. I just remember feeling this sadness amidst intense love from my Dad.

And we talked about some of it later, and I think there was a sympathy, because 30 years ago, if you wanted to make a decision like that one that I made, you had to commit. You had to go find it in print, or smuggle the right kind of VHS tape. Similarly, if you wanted to chastise someone, if you were angry, if you were depressed, seeking

attention, seeking truth, the process required much more intentionality. The availability of distraction, of slipping into our many vices is made rapidly more accessible, in equal conjunction to the speed at which we can reach out to an old friend, send a text that says “I miss you” or “I love you” or “how are you,” or even to send help to someone in need.

So, today, the idea is that we are focusing on social media, but I think that we need to take a look at what social media really is first, especially what it has become. See, we first look at social media as things like Facebook, or Instagram, or Twitter, these things that socially connect us. But when you think about this somewhat vague definition of connective media, then things like texting, video chat, even TV and news sources start to fall into the category of social media.

Which brings me to this:

SLIDE: Media is an easy-access source of distraction

Media, whether you define it as social or otherwise, is the most easy-access source of distraction that we have.

I’m not sure if you all remember, but when Facebook first started, we called the place that we post things our “Wall.” And really that’s what it was, it was like having a wall in front of your house where you post things. Where you post anything, with little to no consequences. Then things start to speed up over the next few years, and now it’s rapid conflict and instant knowledge for everyone, so constant that it is a “feed”. Our social medias are full of people who are instant experts on topics, of rampant arguments, polarized opinions, photographs, updates, cries for help, you name it. It is fast, consistent noise that we buy into or engage with.

Now, what I don’t want here is for you to sit back and think that since you’re not part of Gen Z, or Millennials that this doesn’t apply to you. Because you can tune into 90% of news channels and find the exact same thing—entertaining conflict that’s tailored to you.

We are consistently surrounded by noise

Don’t get me wrong, there are plenty of good things about technology and media. Today is Mother’s Day, one of the ways that I keep in touch with my mom, who lives

350 miles away is through Instagram, she posts pictures, I post pictures, we get to know what each other is up to.

I'm a musician, social media is one of my primary marketing platforms. It lets me engage with my audience, it's a place where I can learn and collaborate with artists.

I can also keep in contact with old friends.

The problem, I believe, is not with the thing, inasmuch as it is that we as people, and we as Christians, have not adequately engaged in the practice of silence and respite. We prefer to fill our lives with action and noise.

SLIDE: We have grown uncomfortable with the *practice of silence*.

We could go on talking about the dangers and the benefits of social media all day, but if we really want to navigate this world we must understand how to disengage from the noise with our Creator.

I'm not 100% sure whether or not anyone who was there knows the details of this story, so if you're watching—here's the truth. When I was about nine or ten years old, my family went to this church that someone hosted at their house. One of the moms would teach the kids kind of like a Sunday school sort of thing in a separate room, and on one day I had cracked one too many jokes and she told me to go and sit with my parents.

I, however, did not want to do that, and proceeded to go into their bathroom, sit in the bathtub and close the curtain. Over the next hour or so, about five people used the bathroom and had no idea that I was in there. Eventually I came out and found my parents after church had ended and we went home.

This was a silence kept out of fear...

I think that many of us can recall this kind of silence in our lives first, something forced and focused, a point—whether humorous or the opposite—where we are quiet because we are afraid of what might happen should we speak. When this becomes our impression of silence, then silence becomes a dreaded thing. A last resort, a lack of agency.

A vastly different experience with silence, though, I find reflecting onto my sophomore year of college. Some friends and I drove to Bears Ears Monument in Utah in October, which has practically no light pollution, to go stargazing. We drove to the top one night, and we spread out by ourselves and laid on the cool fall ground and stared. Yet the thing most noticeable to me was how incredibly loud the silence was. Not a single insect was awake, but the booming in my ears was overwhelming and when contrasted to the expanse of sky I felt so beautifully small. It was like the vastness of quiet and emptiness was actually so immensely full that it overwhelmed me.

See silence also grounds us, forces us almost to face the reality of who, and where we are. To recognize our piece in the grand puzzle as though we stepped away to look at it.

When we look to the scriptures, we find a plethora of examples of retreating from noise to intentionally engage in silence.

Our memory verse this week is Mark 1:35

SLIDE: “Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray.” -Mark 1:35

What’s really awesome about Mark 1 is that it’s essentially broken up into stories of Christ’s miracles between moments of retreat and silence. Christ is baptized, he then retreats to the wilderness alone for 40 days. Jesus drives out a demon, he retreats to a quiet place alone.

On the night that Jesus is betrayed, he brings his disciples to a quiet place to pray.

One of my favorite little verses in the Bible is in 1 Kings 19.

The prophet Elijah is suicidal, he asks God to kill him. What does God do? He directs him to go to a little oasis in the desert alone to sleep, rest, and eat, to be with God in the silence.

St. John of the Cross, a 16th century Spanish priest who wrote a famous poem called The Dark Night of the Soul has this beautiful quote in which he says:

SLIDE: “God’s first language is silence.” -John of the Cross

A few hundred years later, Thomas Keating added to his statement saying:

****ADD THIS BENEATH PREVIOUS SLIDE****

SLIDE: “Everything else is a poor translation” -Thomas Keating

I love this, because we look at our Creator, look at that first moment that we knew where we were spoken into existence. But before He spoke a word, when all was null and void, there was God, and He was silent.

I think that the beauty of this can go even deeper when we really examine it. So I have a degree in English and Writing and I had to take a couple of linguistics courses during my time. While I wasn't the biggest fan of my linguistics professor, I loved linguistics. And there is this really cool theory in linguistics called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, or Linguistic Relativity. It was coined 1929, and there's been tons of research on it since. If you've seen the movie, or read the short story “Arrival” that's actually based on this.

This theory states that the language we speak, or rather the language we think in can determine or alter our worldview and cognition, ranging from our general mood and outlook, to how open or closed we are to new ideas and learning, to even our perception of time.

A great example of this is the Vietnamese language actually does not have what we call the “Conditional tense”, which is how we say something like, “If I had done this, things would have gone better.” In a study on this linguistic aspect, they found that people in Vietnam had significantly less experiences with regret than those speaking Western languages, because it takes more cognitive work to get there.

The reason I'm going on this linguistic nerd out with you, is because to enter into silence, we are literally engaging with the language of God. The still small voice, ever-present love. We live under an “if I speak, then this will happen.” God simply is.

SLIDE: To enter into intentional silence with God is to quiet ourselves and speak His language. The language of present peace and love, rather than the language of words.

We are stepping into a space that can scientifically change our perception, that has the potential to free us from the simplicity of a thought.

This isn't a new idea, in fact it has a name, and we call it the Contemplative Tradition, and it's been practiced for thousands of years. Yet, strangely, I've noticed that our culture often fears it.

In fact, while doing research for this sermon, I typed in "Christian contemplation and meditation."

I was met with an even split on Google between articles about how good and wonderful the practice of meditating with our Creator is good for our spirits, and another half about how if you engage in meditation you're opening the door for demons to enter your mind.

This is the fear, like silently hiding in a bathtub. A silence because of the danger of discovery. We fear that by stopping our bodies, by closing our mouths, regulating our breath and intentionally entering a space that we will encounter the thoughts that we try so hard to suppress. The fear that the thoughts brought on by the body, by emotions, or by hurt might show themselves.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional exchange between two demons, one of the demons says this:

SLIDE: "At the very least, [humans] can be persuaded that bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must always remember, that they are animals and whatever their bodies do affects their souls." -C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

We are designed for quiet and stillness. The practice of this physical thing effects our spirits. Jesus knew this, this is why he leaves his disciples to go to quiet places, why we see him in different physical postures of prayer. Jesus, fully human and fully God is not the perfect man by completely denying that he is a physical being. He is the PERFECT man because he lives his life as fully both, he knew how to exist at the intersection between flesh and spirit.

The 19th century religious philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, in his book *The Sickness Unto Death* describes despair—despair being the ultimate spiritual sickness—as the attempt to deny part of oneself while retaining the other. That for a person to deny the

spiritual and be only physical is despair. And likewise to deny the physical and be only spiritual is despair. We exist in the union between those two things. God made us as flesh and spirit. The great lie, the great danger as pointed out in Lewis' story is that we would believe we are but one.

We are in fact, so physically built for silence, that our voice box actually needs a minimum of ten minutes of rest for every 60 minutes of use in order to NOT sustain permanent damage.

This contemplative practice, this action of intentional quiet and respite that Jesus teaches us provides two key things that actually help us circle back to our relationship with technology and noise.

First, as Richard Foster puts it in his book *Streams of Living Water*:

SLIDE: "Put simply, the contemplative life is the steady gaze of the soul upon the God who love us." -Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water*

By entering into the quiet place with our Creator we are fixing our eyes upon Him, we are engaging in the practice of unifying our heart and our spirit to be away from the noise.

As John of the Cross says, we are:

"[entering into] a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God." -John of the Cross

The second is that:

SLIDE: Through silence, God teaches us the difference between our thoughts and our identity.

The world of media governs us under the belief that our thoughts are absolute reality. Just look at any social media or news feed and you will find people spouting a present viewpoint or reaction with the lexicon of absolute truth.

It is a place where two people could perceive a car swerve and crash. One person thinks the driver was drunk. The other thinks the driver needed glass. Both yell and fight at each other with certainty that they are right until a police officer provides a

statement that the car blew a tire. Yet, depending on which side of the street you were on, which thought you had first, that is the truth and your allegiance.

My girlfriend and I got in a big argument the other day, and I said some very hurtful things within the space of reactive emotion. After the fact, all I could reflect on was how much hurt I could have saved if I had taken a moment to observe my thoughts and their sources before treating them as though they were truth.

I think that we as Christians sometimes fear the meditative practice because we are forced to observe the “bad thoughts”, the ones we didn’t necessarily act on but are ashamed of, and we fear this because things like our fast media, and our way of life have taught us to believe that what we think is who we are. But oh, the peace you can experience within a long silence when you have sat, and focused on God, quieted your breath and looked at your own thoughts. The ability to ask the question of why you experienced a thought, where it came from, and how it relates to who you are is an opportunity that silence provides.

And Jesus shows us this in His life. If we reflect on when Christ goes to the garden of Gethsemane. The Gospel of Luke says he departs about a stone’s throw from his disciples to be alone, and he says this prayer,

SLIDE: “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.” -Luke 22:42 NIV

This is a beautiful one-line demonstration of this truth. Jesus was a man, He was fully God, and yet also a 30-something year old middle-eastern man. I think we get this idea in our head that Jesus didn’t have to experience random thoughts like ourselves, that his body worked differently than ours. But here we see again this duality between a man having a full-blown anxiety attack—he’s sweating blood here okay, I don’t think any of us have had a panic attack that bad before. He says to God, if You are willing, let me not go through this. There is the thought. The thought that this is not what He wants to do, it’s painful, it’s awful, there will be a sequence of violent, torturous moments. Yet, not My will but Yours be done. There’s the identity. The Son of God. The living sacrifice. The only thing we know to be spoken in a period of silence that we don’t have a length given to us for.

We learn from the life of Jesus that our thoughts and our identity exist in this state of flux. The practice of silence that we also see Jesus so engaged in is what he was in in

this very point and throughout his life. We examine the time in the desert when He is tempted. You could be a king, you could eat (as Richard Foster says, could become the world's greatest baker), you could prove that you're the messiah if you jump. All the very same temptations that he would face throughout his entire ministry, but did not embrace. There is the thought, and then there is the truth. Jesus practices the silence, practices this discernment before he even starts His ministry. Our practice of silence provides the opportunity for us to engage with God, and allow Him to show us the difference between the thoughts we experience, and who we are.

As said in Isaiah 26:3

SLIDE: "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you." -Isaiah 26:3

To engage in the silence with our Creator is to offer the possibility of peace in the mind. That we would understand our identity in terms of how it relates to him. That we could separate ourselves from the noise.

In his book *Into the Silent Land*, the theologian Martin Laird says:

SLIDE: "When the wandering, racing mind grows still, when fragmented craving grows still, when the heart's 'great passions' are rapt in stillness, then is 'the mind's cession of its kingdom,' a great letting go as a deeper dimension of the human person is revealed. From this depth God is seen to be the ground of both peace and chaos, one with ourselves and one with all the world, the ground 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). This depth of silence is more than the mere absence of sound and is the key. 'The silence holds with its gloved hand the wild hawk of the mind.'" -Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land*

Throughout this same book, Laird provides a number of different tactics for engaging in intentional silence and quiet with God. These range from posture, to breath, to even the repetition of a short prayer as an opportunity to pull your focus back to God in these moments. And look, whether it is five minutes or two hours at the beginning or end of your day, this intentional silence is good, and I'm telling you, it may start as difficult or uncomfortable, but you will grow to love it.

My encouragement to you is to try to develop this practice, however long. I took my Rooted students on a retreat this year where we were silent from 9PM to 9AM. 12 hours. All of my students said at the end of it that the first hour was extremely difficult,

but then they didn't want it to end. Because that peace and connection with their Creator was so special and wonderful, was actually so rare that they didn't want it to end. Some engaged in a practice called Lectio Divina, which is where you read, meditate, pray and contemplate scripture. This is described as a practice meant to align the heart and the mind as you engage with the living word of God.

Some walked around.

Some read scripture.

Some sat for hours in prayer, or simply asked for God to quiet that wild hawk of the mind.

But what is most wonderful to see is the immense peace and joy and self-control that comes from engaging with silence.

So here are some helpful tools for this type of silence, and I'm pulling some of these from Martin Laird's book "Into the Silent Land," so if you want to dive deeper, I'd recommend giving it a read.

SLIDE: Be intentional with your posture.

There are a number of good postures to use for your silence, remember that story, our bodies are important. A good one I like to us is a tripod, feet on the ground, sitting on a chair, back supported, hands on the knees. You can kneel, you can lie down with your hands on your stomach. Find a position where your comfort level doesn't distract you. But, as Laird says,

"Many Christian contemplatives have come to see the benefits of the classic lotus, half lotus, etc. All things being equal, they are well worth learning and can be found in any good book on yoga. Most western Christian contemplatives, however, sit on a chair or a prayer bench. In any case there is nothing magical or esoteric about learning proper posture."

SLIDE: Be intentional with your time

Set aside the time. If you have chosen to use the time for this purpose, whether with a timer, or during a time without responsibility, this practice will become easier. I believe

that in all things with our relationship with our Creator we are called to be intentional. If you want to engage in silence, to listen for that still, small voice, to just be. Dedicate the time. It is far more difficult to have stress or distraction if you know there is nothing needed of you.

SLIDE: Don't have shame in your mind wandering.

Another thing Laird says in his book is, "It takes less than a minute of attempting to practice inner stillness to realize that however fidgety the body may be, the real obstacle to inner silence is the mind. Even when it is not performing its noble function of discursive reason and reflection, the mind is constantly on the move."

It is okay to lose focus. Take these moments of misdirect as an opportunity to celebrate returning your focus to Jesus. One of the ways I like to do this is to actually speak "I am made by God to be loved by God" through my breaths, to allow my mind to drift into the love of my Creator. Many contemplatives talk similarly about having a prayer word, Bible verse, or phrase that you can repeat to draw the mind back to its focus upon God.

Focusing on the breath in conjunction with this is a great way to engage in silence. Breathe in the breath given to you by God, focus on it and you will quickly find you're much more capable of being in the silence, in the peace of nothing with your creator.

And hey, if you fall asleep, that's okay too. I have never known a parent to get upset at their child for falling asleep in their lap. Your heavenly father is not disappointed in you for resting deeply in His presence.

SLIDE: Build the habit

It doesn't matter how short you do it for, this habit allows us to build a deeper relationship with our Creator, keep it up, you will see the benefits.

Through this practice our hearts and minds learn how to be in silence and pause with God, the noise that surrounds us dissipates, the distractions lose their power as we grow comfortable with the silence that Christ taught us through His life. Not a lack of feeling or separation from the effects of the world upon us, but an understanding of our identity and connection with God regardless.

I know it feels like we've long departed social media at this point, and that is the goal. Whatever the distraction, the temptation, the intrusive thought may be, it exists within this cloud of noise. If we want to navigate it, whether it be toy or tool, we must grow comfortable with the quiet, the opposite of this noise that we would not fear it, but would run to it.

I want to leave you with this:

In Lamentations, a poem of pain and lament, Jeremiah says this:

SLIDE:

**“Let him sit alone and keep quiet,
Since He has laid it on him.
Let him put his mouth in the dust;
Perhaps there is hope.” -Lamentations 3:28-29, NASB**

Or, and I really like how The Message interpretation puts this:

SLIDE:

**“When life is heavy and hard to take,
Go off by yourself. Enter the silence.
Bow in prayer. Don't ask questions:
Wait for hope to appear.” -Lamentations 3:28-29, MSG**

Before I pray, I'm going to give us an opportunity to practice this, we are going to have two minutes of silence. I know this might be uncomfortable, but we're going to give it a shot. I am going to ask you to keep your phones put away during this time, and to just sit, to breathe, and to be.

2 MINUTES

PRAYER