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The Deafening Silence

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The word “Lent” is from an Old Latin source. It means “springtime.” Time of beginning again. Jesus spent that first Lent – the way some of us ought to spend this coming spring: off alone somewhere in the desert – forty days and forty nights off by himself. Why? To think, to pray, to put the pieces together – “to get his head on straight” as the youngsters would say today. There were things buried deep within him wanting to get out, or need to get straightened out. Maybe the soul has a kind of sonar that warns us something’s coming up to the surface, from deep down in the psyche—and we need Lent to get away—so we can think and pray and discover what it is and deal with it and put it in its place. Because of “the stress and strain of everyday life” (as the ad puts it), we cannot quite put our finger on it, on what’s bothering us. The noise of daily routine often hides it. But some unnamed part of ourselves is trying to rise to the surface. Maybe we can if we’re lucky, or very empirical—identify it in the midst of ordinary days: identify it as some longing, some hurt, some jealousy – some uncertainty about who we are and what we believe: some question about the significance of ourselves – trying to surface.

It may be that when questions like these do begin to stir in our lower depths – there develops a practical reason for the two things Jesus did about it that first Lent: fasting and solitude. To be deeply troubled inside yourself, to be disturbed about your life doesn’t exactly help either your digestion or your disposition. So maybe there was good reason to 1) Fast and 2) Find a bit of solitude. These are times when neither food nor company seem too attractive.

Read your Gospels. Jesus spent a lot of time alone. After all, it’s not easy to think in a mob scene. Even T.V. in the living room becomes an artificially induced mob-scene every night in your own home. Sitting in front of that talking box. It’s not you thinking any more. It’s the mob thinking for you. It’s the network doing your thinking for you. It’s easy to spot children who sit too long before the tube – they have a blank look. Without that flickering screen, they’re inevitably lost. Not enough private thinking.

Jesus spent a lot of time alone. Not to get away from the electronic mob of course. (I’ve often thought had he had T.V, we would likely never have heard of Jesus of Nazareth. He would never have left the house. He would have stayed home and watched some Roman commentator pundit – possibly named Walrus Cronkitos – showing what the mob was up to in Athens or

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Jerusalem.) No, Jesus was a gregarious type, thoroughly enjoying the real world and it's real people. He enjoyed mobs. He was out in the midst of their real problems: healing their sick, reclaiming their lost, forgiving the sinners and letting the self-righteous among them have it where it hurt them most: a swift kick in their conscious. Jesus loved the give and take of conversation. He never waited to be formally introduced. He enjoyed strangers. So – his regular need to be alone—was not a search for permanent privacy like Garbo – “I want so much to be alone.” Or isolation, escape from the mean old world, or because his ministry was too much of a burden to him, or because he grew to thoroughly dis-like people in general. Even rascals were “S.O.G's” to Jesus, “Sons of God.” So he was not what we call “a loner.”

It was just that he often chose to be alone. For example, after feeding the 5000, what does he do? He disappears. Or again, he was alone in the garden. And after the resurrection, he was often alone.

Why? G.K. Chesterton said Jesus went out alone to laugh – out loud – so as not to hurt his follower's feelings. They certainly could ask the silliest questions and misunderstood Jesus in the dumbest ways. Their fumbling and tom foolishness – still make us smile.

So maybe Jesus did laugh out loud when he was alone – at himself, at them, at the very devil. But what he mainly fasted and went away for – was to think. Get this straight: he didn't disappear to avoid action. But to think before he acted again. Remember? When he disappeared after feeding that hungry mob –he reappeared in the storm to the fears of his friends.

His times of solitude were not to escape reality – but to face it with a clearer head and a calmer spirit and a sharper sense of what he was to do about it. For example, that long forty-day Lenten silence of his determined the course of the rest of his life. He put aside forever – as temptation – as satanic – something he was just beginning to realize about himself –his ability as a crowd player to play the role of popular magician – politician – rich guru – or revolutionary. Who would throw the Romans in the sea by a military coup: all of these alternatives were clearly open to him. He had his options. He made his choice. During those forty days – alone and hungry – he wrestled – not only with Satan – but – like Jacob – with Malak Yahweh – facing the meaning of his life with no outside intervention and no distractions whatever.

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As for us? Forty days is way too much. Facing ourselves – our lives – our options – under the lonely light of God – trying to figure out who we are what we are supposed to do?

Making our life choices.

Why after only fourteen hours alone in the desert

- if we had the time
- if we could get away by ourselves
- if we had a convenient desert

Why, in fourteen hours, we'd be saying, "So long, Jesus, old pal – you stay your forty days in the wilderness – but we'd better saddle on up and head back to town to see what the girls are cooking up at the saloon. See ya' around.

Honestly, solitude is not our mug-of-beer, our cup of tea (bag?) For all our complaints (about the telephone, the doorbell, the rat race, the kids, the noise, the T.V.) about the last thing in the world we really want is time to think – especially alone. To avoid it, we invent sensitivity groups and encounter sessions so we can at least do it together. It's almost as though we think – if we're going to despair, we might as well despair in a crowd. For we are a hyperactive – hyper talkative society and we are stuck with it. Silence to us is deafening.

So the forty days of Lent we might as well forget. We'd be restless, then anxious, then terrified. Spooked. So What about fifteen minutes a day – somehow, somewhere – to sit and think and talk to God and ask open, honest questions – questions like: How'm I doin' God? Or "Oh my God, how have I gotten myself in this mess? And how do I get out of it? Or where do I go from here? Or Teach me, God, how to begin again – how to live the days that are still left –how to live them clean, true – a new beginning, Lord – after all, it's Lent, my Lord – it's Spring – time of new beginnings.

And if fifteen minutes of that is too much – would you believe five?

Let's try it –

Just five minutes of silence to collect the scattered forces of our souls

Don't be frightened, God is here Just in the nick of time –

I'll ask the choir to save us with beautiful music.