



Into Silence

the sound of a gentle whisper

Compiled and written by Holly Walton.

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All quotations are referenced in the resource section at the end.

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Silence

Despite all the blessings of modern technology, its curse is that we have lost touch with silence and stillness in our world. For the most part we aren't tuned in to the gentle rhythms of the changing seasons, or day to night. Most of us, for example, have never experienced complete darkness.

We don't experience solitude, because we are always connected. And we often don't experience true connection because so much of our life is conducted virtually, behind a mask of technology.

As I write this I hear cars racing in the distance. Down the road someone is noisily working on a boat motor. Over the wall my neighbour waters thirsty plants. The fridge shudders in the kitchen. My phone pings. And then there is the internal noise, the kind that Job understood when he said:

"I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil."

My mind space is filled with rosters and appointments, work deadlines and chores. Time is pressurised, divided up and shared out amongst the various facets of my life. Sometimes it can feel like I am being dictated to by a calendar app that is constantly pinging with 15-minute reminders.

In our noisy and quick-fix world we have come to expect that the important things in life will be highlighted, spotlighted and trending on social media. It is easy to assume that we would experience God in that way too. Perhaps through miracles or divine prophecies or life pathways lit with neon signs that are flashing directions and times to the next destination.

But most of the time God doesn't meet us like that...

I can't hear
God's voice...

I have never
thought about
being silent...

I am so busy...
I just don't
have the time
to be quiet...

What does the Bible say?

solitude

Lamentations 3: 28-30

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

- The Message Version

silence

Psalm 62:5

For God alone my soul waits in silence and quietly submits to Him, for my hope is from Him

stillness

Psalm 37

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him

Psalm 46:3

Though the waters
roar and foam,
though the
mountains tremble at
its roaring.
Selah...

'Selah' is a mysterious word
used over 70 times throughout
the Psalms.

The Amplified Bible version
translates Selah as:

*"pause,
and
calmly think of that"*



Matthew 14:23

After He had dismissed the crowds, [Jesus] went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. When it was evening, He was there alone.

solitude

John 6:15

Then Jesus, knowing that they were going to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountainside by Himself.

Matthew 6:6

Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

silence

- The Message Version

Matthew 11: 29

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me [following Me as My disciple], for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest (renewal, blessed quiet) for your souls

stillness

- The Amplified Bible



The sound of a gentle whisper

“Go out and stand before me on the mountain,” the Lord told him. And as Elijah stood there, the Lord passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there was
the sound of a gentle whisper.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And a voice said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

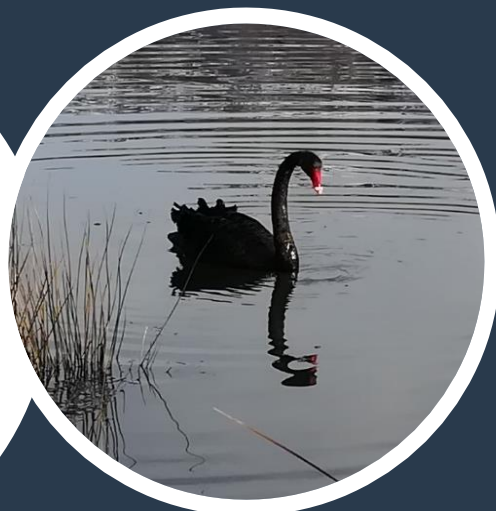
We can learn a lot from how God revealed himself to the prophet Elijah on the mountain all those thousands of years ago. Elijah was in a cave on the mountain. The mountainside was pummelled by an almighty wind that ripped rocks loose by its power. “But the Lord was not in the wind”.

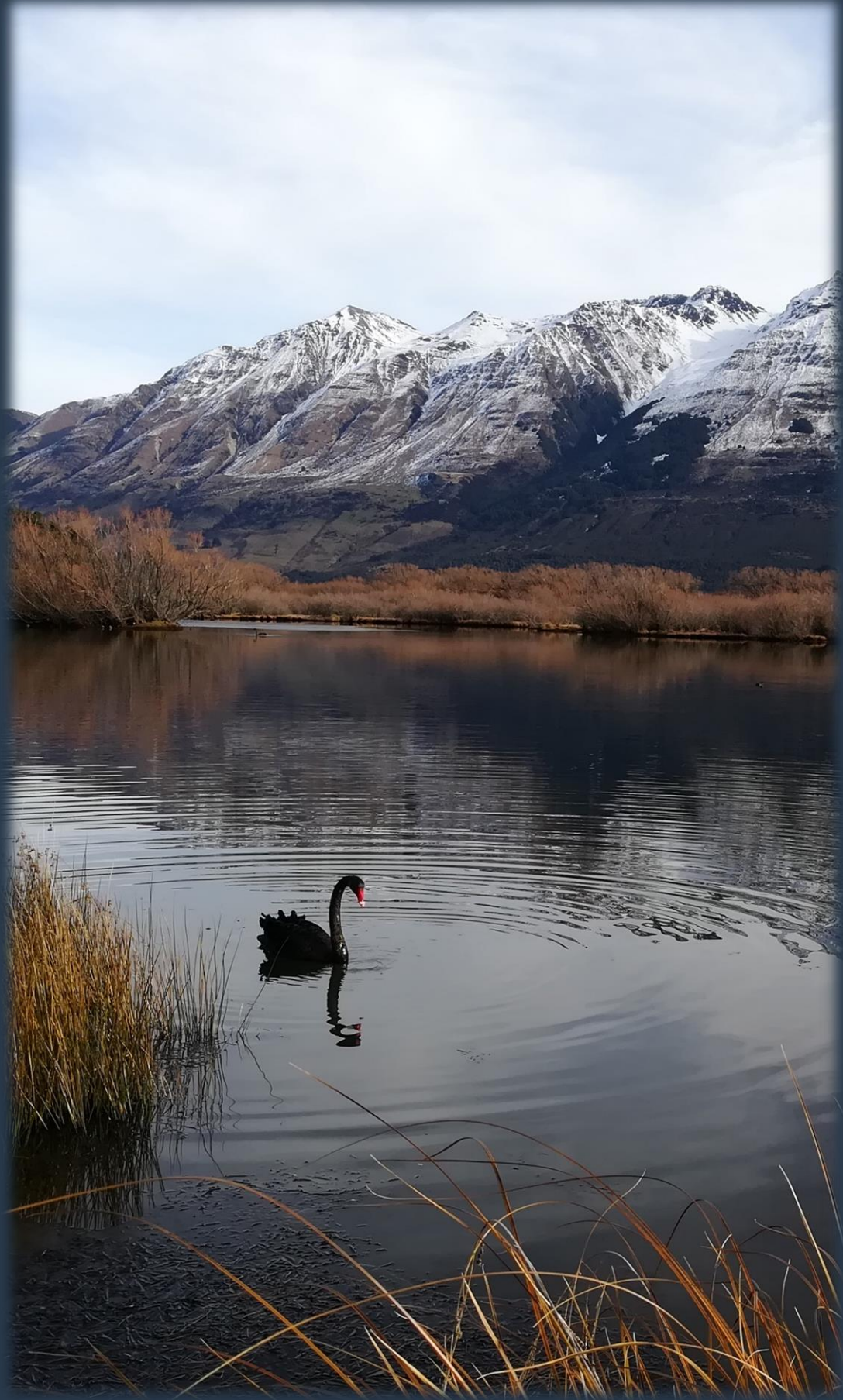
This incredible wind was followed by an earthquake, and the earthquake was followed by fire, but God was neither in the earthquake nor in the fire.

Then after all the noise and chaos, destruction and power there was “a sound of a gentle whisper” that drew Elijah from the safety of his cave. And God was in the gentle whisper.

If we are desiring a closer relationship with God, we need to allow the time and grace to go deeper into ourselves so that we can be still and quiet. In that place of silence we may hear God’s gentle whisper.

**We need to make
time to be alone,
silent
and still...**





Solitude

Be intentionally alone.
With yourself and with God.


When life is heavy and hard to take, go off by yourself...

It is only by intentionally withdrawing from what would otherwise be constant social interaction that we can be fully present — to ourselves, to God and others.

In solitude we can trace the intricate webs of our relationships, understanding something of who we are and who we are to others. And most mysteriously, in solitude we have the opportunity to meet with God.

“The fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others. There comes a new freedom to be with people. There is new attentiveness to their needs, new responsiveness to their hurts”

- Richard Foster

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black top and a patterned skirt, is sitting on a large, grey, rounded rock in the foreground. She is looking out over a calm, blue lake towards a range of brown, rugged mountains in the distance. The sky is overcast with soft, grey clouds. The scene is framed by a large white circle on the right side of the image.

Solitude teaches us how to truly connect with ourselves, with each other and with God

Silence


Jesus said to his disciples: *“Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace...”*

Find a place of silence – quiet – seclusion away from:

- distracting sounds...
- interruptions... emails, social media... switch off your phone
- internal distractions... worry, fear, anxiety, burdens, plans...

“If we hope to move beyond the superficialities of our culture, including our religious culture, we must be willing to go down into the recreating silences, into the inner world of contemplation.”

- Richard Foster



Silence teaches us
to listen

Stillness

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him...

Our society encourages and promotes busyness, activity and productivity – doing as opposed to being. What work do you do? What did you achieve today? If we're honest, all the doing and achieving does nothing to touch our deepest parts or draw us to God. The busyness does not satisfy or make us happy.

In the poem "Keeping Quiet" Pablo Neruda writes:

"If we were not so single-minded about keeping our lives moving, and for once could do nothing, perhaps a huge silence might interrupt this sadness of never understanding ourselves..."

Are we so single-minded about keeping life moving that we are not actually willing to give space and time to allow "a huge silence" to interrupt our lives?

Be still and know that I am God.

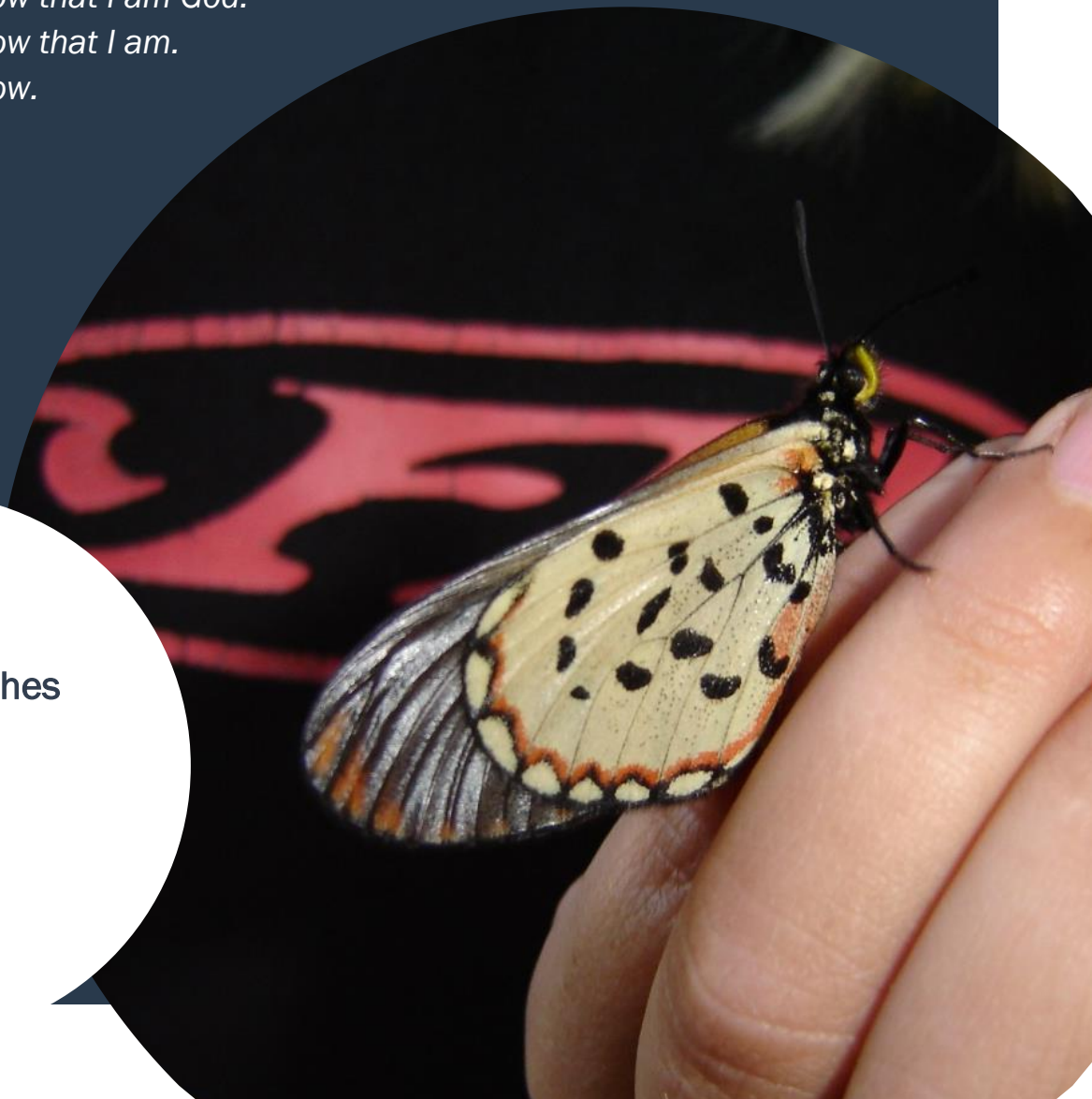
Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Stillness teaches
us to
simply
be





Solitude

I can make a time to go off on my own.



Silence

I can find a place that is quiet, where I will not be disturbed.

I can switch off my phone, not check my emails.



Stillness

How do I do that?

*"I have no peace,
no quietness;
I have no rest,
but only turmoil."*

- Job





Finding Stillness

“When we despair of gaining inner transformation through human powers of will and determination, we are open to a wonderful new realisation: inner righteousness is a gift from God to be graciously received. The needed change within us is God’s work, not ours. The demand is for an inside job, and only God can work from the inside. We cannot attain or earn this righteousness of the kingdom of God; it is a grace that is given.”

- Richard Foster

Beneath the churned up, distracting, bubbling surface of our lives there is a calm depth. A quiet depth. A place where the fish glide silently, the plants sway rhythmically and the light of the sun or the moon and countless stars filters gently down. It is the still place deep within us, Elijah’s cave, where God speaks in a gentle whisper and by God’s grace we can listen.

Practical Steps

A Time

Committing to a regular time is the first step in the journey to stillness with God. Early morning before the home becomes busy or at lunch time or perhaps in the evening after the business of the day is completed. Experiment with a time that is sustainable for a regular silent space. Choose a length of time that is manageable. Too long and you are likely to be disheartened. Too short and you are likely to remain distracted!

A Place

Try to find a place that you can use regularly – somewhere that is quiet, away from distraction and comfortable. Returning to the same place each day is easiest to commit to. A study, a special chair, the garage, the car, a nearby chapel or the local park are a few ideas. It may help to have something that symbolises their silent space, a crucifix or a lit candle for example.

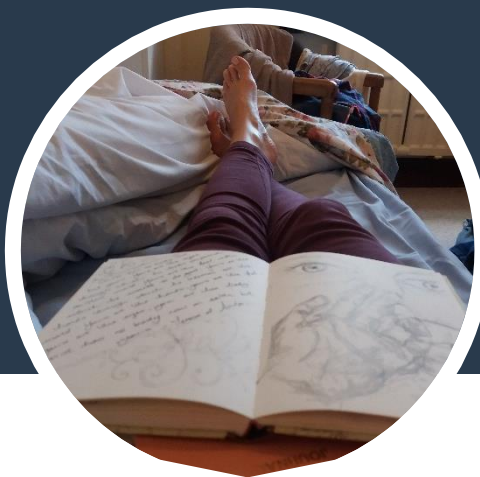
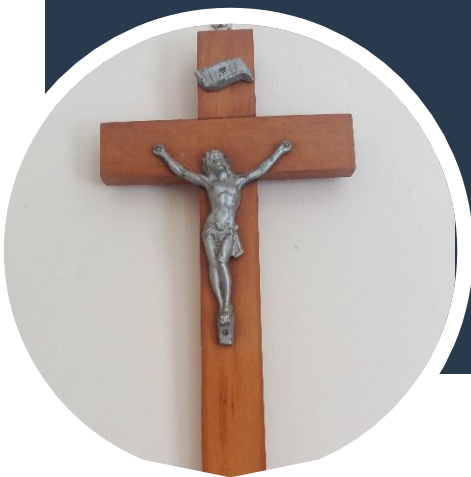
I am all set up. Now what?

There are many ways to find stillness – from breathing techniques to fixed prayers to creative exercises. We are all different, so there is no “right” way. What you find life-giving now may be dry and uninspiring in years to come.

The following pages contain a selection of techniques or spiritual practices that others have found useful. Experiment with the ones that attract your attention, add your own unique touch and remember these are simply tools to aid the journey.

“spiritual practices are about life, about training ourselves to become the kinds of people who have eyes and actually see, and who have ears and actually hear, and so experience...not just survival but Life...[they] are ways of becoming awake and staying awake to God.”

- Brian McLaren



Breathing

Meditation - centering prayer - contemplative prayer – Yahweh prayer

*“The Jews did not speak God’s name,
but breathed it with an open mouth and throat:
inhale—Yah; exhale—weh.*

*By our very breathing we are speaking the name of God.
This makes it our first and our last word as we enter and leave the world.”*

- Richard Rohr

How?

- Find a comfortable position: sit, kneel, lie, stand... make sure you are relaxed but alert.
- Breathe in deeply - Yah – and breathe out deeply – weh. Keep breathing slowly and deeply. Your mind will not become still for a while... keep focussing on your breathing. Let the thoughts and emotions that clamour for your attention gently pass by... keep breathing in and out...
- Maintain this gentle rhythm for as long as you are able – a common guide is that it takes around 20 minutes for the mind to finally settle.

Other variations

- Instead of Yahweh, choose a word or phrase that is meaningful to you – *Lord, have mercy* or *Come, Lord Jesus*, for example
- Instead of focussing on breathing try “Palms down, palms up”:

Start with your palms facing down, symbolising your desire to let go of all the distractions in your mind. Pray them: *Lord I give you my worry over... and my frustration at...*

When you have let go of all that you need to, turn your palms upward, symbolising your longing to receive from God.

Pray the things that you would like to receive and then sit in silence – allowing God to speak to you.



Reading

But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart...

Reflective reading

- Go to your quiet space, sit comfortably and settle with your Bible
- Choose a passage from one of the Gospels, usually ten or fifteen verses. Using a reading plan will help you not to get distracted by the choosing.
- Read the passage aloud, slowly. Listen to yourself reading the words, savour the words.
- When you have finished reading, take a moment. Did a word or phrase catch your attention? Did something touch you? If so, reflect on this. Now read the passage again, holding this insight in your mind.
- Spend some time talking to God about any insights you may have had. Treasure them. Ponder them.



Imaginative reading

- Go to your quiet space, sit comfortably and settle with your Bible.
- Choose a story or parable from one of the Gospels. Read it slowly. Imagine you are there. What does it look like? Can you smell the approaching storm? How does the ground feel? Can you taste the cooked fish? Who are you in the story?

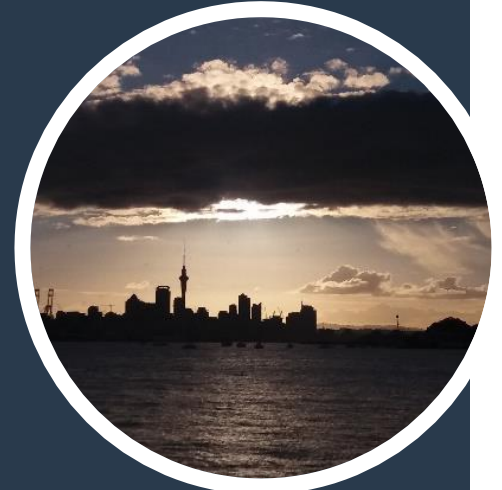
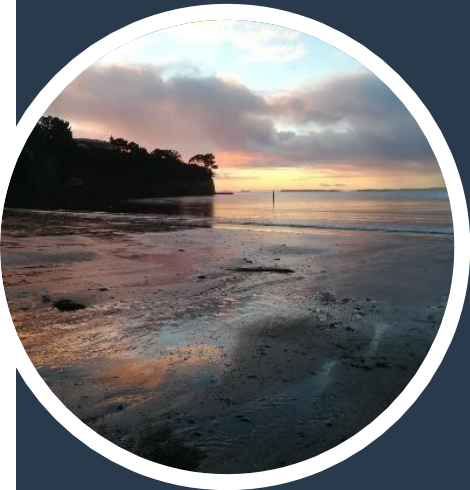
"At one time, you are the publican: at another time, you are the prodigal... at another time, you are Mary Magdalene: at another time, Peter in the porch... Till your whole New Testament is all over autobiographic of you."

– Alexander Whyte

Reflecting

"...when we are alone... The time is ripe for looking back over the day, the week, the year, and trying to figure out where we have come from and where we are going to, for sifting through the things we have done and the things we have left undone for a clue to who we are and who, for better or worse, we are becoming... Then at last we see... There has never been a time past when God wasn't with us as the strength beyond our strength, the wisdom beyond our wisdom. The past and the future. Memory and expectation. Remember and hope. Remember and wait. Remember him who himself remembers us as he promised to remember the thief who died beside him... Praise him."

- Frederick Beuchner



How?

There are many different forms of daily reflection, also known as the examen. The following one is adapted from "Reimagining the Examen":

- Sit comfortably and take a few deep and refreshing breaths.
- Look back over the day that has been, moment by moment.
- Savour the gifts and the moments that were good, giving thanks.
- Repent of the things that went wrong – any failures or faults. Give them to God. Let them go.
- Ask God what else you need to reflect on from the day – anything else that might be going on below the surface in your thoughts, emotions or actions.
- Ask God for wisdom to discern the way forward and ask for the grace and the gifts that you may need.
- Spend some time in silence allowing God to speak to you. There may be only silence – remember that this is OK!

Other times for reflecting

- At the end of a year – either a calendar year or at a birthday or anniversary.
- At the end of a life phase – it could be the end of a job, the end of studying or at retirement.
- At the end of a spiritually difficult season.

With all these endings it is good to savour the positives, to learn from the mistakes and to give thanks for the gifts of the journey. Without reflection these gifts will pass us by.



Writing

“Keep a notebook or journal of lessons learned. This is not a diary of events, but a record of what you are learning. Write down the insights and life lessons God teaches you about him, about yourself, about life, relationships, and everything else. Record these so you can review and remember them and pass them on to the next generation. The reason we must relearn lessons is that we forget them. Reviewing your spiritual journal regularly can spare you a lot of unnecessary pain and heartache.”

- Rick Warren

My journal is a great source of comfort to me. In its pages I am free to explore my issues, my concerns, my highs and my lows quietly by myself. When I write about something that is threatening to overwhelm my mind, I find that with each page of outpouring, my thoughts start to become coherent and my mind starts to become calmer. Journalling is a way for me to sort out exactly what is going on in my head.

It is also far more than that. It is a place to record my triumphs and my failures in life and to explore how I feel about them. In my journal I write my prayers and record the answers to my prayers. I write about ethics and relationships and doctrines and observations that I have of everyday life. Sometimes I write poetry, sometimes I write prose and at other times I draw.

I have old journals dating back to early adulthood. I keep them because they are a reminder that my life is a journey. They remind me of how far I have come in so many areas – and conversely how stuck I am in others. My journals have become a sacred space.

How?

- Buy a journal, pens and felt tips.
- In your silent time start writing, drawing, doodling. No one else will see this. It is yours alone. There is no right or wrong!
- Capture prayers, thoughts, insights, favourite quotes, challenging messages. Write poetry, prose, psalms, laments.
- Keep your journals and use them as a starting point for reflection.



Nature

“On the mountain I found my true home. It is with The Creator, The Source, who wants nothing more than to spoil me with blessings galore. I find it hard to believe that all God wants is to enjoy my company. And why? Simply because I am loved. So incredibly loved. Truly loved beyond comprehension by an omnipotent presence that is so vast as to be almost insensible.”


- Paul Hawker



How?

Birds, blossoms, autumn leaves, warming sunshine, soft rain, powerful lightning – they all speak of aspects of our Creator.

- Allow yourself space to relish nature – the sights, the sounds, the smells, the textures.
- Walk in nature, barefoot if possible, and look mindfully at the abundance of colours and textures around you. Your very breath and heartbeat are a testimony to a loving and all-powerful Creator.
- Become aware of the majesty and mystery of Creation... reflect on your own “created-ness”.
- We are fearfully and wonderfully made In God’s image. Take time to savour that truth.



*You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before
you, and all the trees of the
field
will clap their hands*

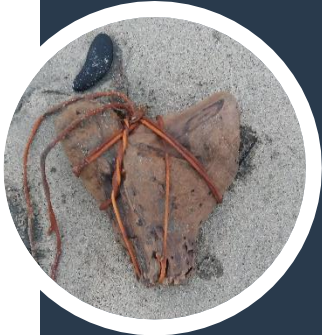
Isaiah 55:12

Finding God in All Things



Movement

- Try movement like running, walking, swimming, or dancing to help clear the mind. This is not the same as scheduled exercise which would be just another form of busyness.



Music

"I am a hole in a flute that the Christ's breath moves through... listen to this music" - Hafiz

- Try listening to music, singing, composing or playing an instrument.



Art – Architecture – Sculpture – Poetry – and...

- Reflect on icons, artworks, photos, sculptures. Notice any symbolism, meaning or emotion that arises.
- Draw, paint or sculpt an object, person or scene. Be fully aware of and present to what you are doing.
- Try colouring in or doodling. Colouring is less intimidating than producing an artwork.
- Beautiful architecture has the potential to draw deep emotional responses from us.
- Reflectively read poetry or prose.
- Try cooking, woodworking or clay modelling as a way to still your mind.
- Consider gardening, making a puzzle, working on a car engine, photography or any other hobby.



"Great artists know that it isn't just about what you add; sometimes the most important work is knowing what to take away. Removing all the clutter, excess, all the superfluous elements – and finding out the process what's been there the whole time."

- Rob Bell

You're not alone

Sometimes it is hard to get in touch with the deep things of our hearts and finding words to express these things to God is almost impossible. And it is often at these times that our minds and hearts will not be stilled. You can take heart knowing that many have walked this path before you – you are not alone. You may consider finding a spiritual director to walk alongside you on this journey into silence. There are also many excellent books, websites and apps available with prayers and reading plans for every rhythm and season.

How?

- Choose a daily devotional book or mobile app that has been recommended by someone you trust, or try one of those listed in the resources section. In your silent space quietly and mindfully read the devotion for the day. Reflect on the thoughts or emotions that arise in you. Is there something God may be saying to you?
- Similarly, make use of a prayer guide to form your own prayers or simply pray the set prayers. If you are praying a set prayer, personalise it by adding words as you go.
- Remember that skimming over a daily devotional or prayer guide is **NOT** taking time to mindfully be with God!
- Jesus gave us a beautiful set prayer, with instructions! Try praying this prayer and make it your own:

*...when you pray, go away by yourself,
shut the door behind you,
and pray to your Father in private.
Then your Father,
who sees everything,
will reward you.
When you pray,
don't babble on and on ...
Pray like this:*

Our Father in heaven,
may your name be kept holy.
May your Kingdom come soon.
May your will be done on
earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us today the food we need,
and forgive us our sins, as we
have forgiven those who sin
against us. And don't let us yield
to temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one...

In parting

As a child I used to sit in the dark listening to the leaves of the enormous tree outside my window as they gently whispered into the silence. God met with me in those times of silence.

But, I had forgotten this. I allowed the busyness of life, the distractions of work, studying and mothering to erode my quiet times and eat away at my relationship with God. It happens so quietly, so easily.

It was after my mum's memorial service, whilst standing at the door thanking family and friends, that I caught sight of a little advert pinned to the notice board... an invitation to a quiet morning in the church garden. What an unexpected gift that proved to be.

In the silence of retreats held in the tranquillity of the churchyard, I began to learn, as an adult, what it means to be silent. Not silent and depressed, nor silent and morbid. Rather, I began to relearn what I somehow knew as a child - how to be silent and peaceful. Silent and still. Silent in the presence of God.

The invitation into silence is an open one.

How is God inviting you?

Selah.



References

Quiet

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What does the Bible say?

- Online: www.biblegateway.com
- Try different translations and search for silence, solitude, stillness, selah

The sound of a gentle whisper

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Solitude

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- *"Keeping Quiet"* Pablo Neruda
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Finding Stillness

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You're not alone

- A list of New Zealand spiritual directors can be found at www.acsd.org.nz/find-nz-spiritual-director/
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- *A New Zealand Prayer Book*. William Collins Publishers. 1988
- Tickle, Phyllis. *The Divine Hours*. Oxford University Press. 2007
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- Online: DotMagis devotions – from www.ignatianspirituality.com
- Mobile Apps:
 - a. *Sacred Space* by Loyola Press
 - b. *Pray as you Go – Daily Prayer* by Jesuit Apps
 - c. *3 minute retreat* by Loyola Press
 - d. *Jesuit Prayer* by The Jesuits

in the

solitude
silence
stillness

may you
hear the sound of God
gently whispering your name