

## **“Listening to the Soul: Taking a Poustinia Day”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church  
for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 66: 8-20

John 14:15-21

(Sermon by The Rev. Catherine Somerville)

Text: Psalm 66:8-20

I was flipping through a magazine that comes to our house and came across a really delightful article. The author had recently retired and he had decided that one of his goals in retirement was to spend time every day in contemplation. He decided to try meditating.

He lived on a quiet street. There were few interruptions to his day - or so he thought. He decided that he would meditate right after breakfast in his living room which looked out on his quiet neighbourhood. He set the timer on the stove for twenty minutes. He figured twenty minutes was good for a beginner in meditation. He knew that it wouldn't be long before he was up to at least an hour, maybe two, every day. He brought in a good chair and settled himself, aware of his posture, back straight, feet squared and on the floor, hands on his knees, neck and shoulders in alignment. He had been thinking about a phrase to repeat, and he had come up with a few words that seemed right. He started the prescribed breathing technique: breathing in, breathing out.

It took about 30 seconds for the silence to settle in. He became aware to the ticking of the clock in the kitchen - quite loud in the silence. He caught himself in the distraction, and giving a good mental shake, he started again.

His dog was asleep over in the corner. It wasn't long before he realized that the dog engaged in this persistently annoying sort of snoring, more of a snuffle than a snore. He had never realized that his dog snuffle-snored before that moment.

Again he brought himself back.

The fridge came on.

Then a car drove down the street.

The neighbour was bringing in her garbage cans and making the most unholy racket.

His phone beeped that he had a text.

He could hear a couple of birds loudly proclaiming their presence in the trees across the way.

Then his stomach started to make some weird gurgly noises.

It was right about then that the stove timer went off. His twenty minutes of meditating were up, and he realized that his quiet life was not so quiet after all.

Wanting to spend time listening for God is something most of us are seeking after. But it's difficult. We are so used to doing, that it's hard just to be, and the world has become so noisy.

Jean Stairs was the chair of theological studies at Queen's University, and about 20 years ago, she wrote a book detailing the call God plants in human beings to listen deeply to the soul. She claims that this work is about taking the time to discern God's spirit within, and then acting upon what we are hearing. In her words, "God both wakens our ears so that we may listen and opens our ears so that we may hear. It is about our ears being awake and attentive to the voices of yearning, weariness and all the sighs we make, in the places that are too deep for words."

Jean Stairs invites her readers to discover long held traditions and find new ways to listen for God. She writes about bringing intention - setting aside a particular time or activity for your listening, and making it a regular part of your daily life. Stairs offers the insight that listening is really our desire to live in obedience, and being open to experience, to follow God with the messages we hear. There is also the idea of being receptive. She writes, "Our souls cannot thrive in a fast-paced life without claiming some time to take things in, uncover what lies deeply inside the experience, and mull things over. If we are gulping things down without taking the time to chew on them well, then we won't know what we've eaten, let alone what effect it will have on us."

She goes on to review some ways to listen for God. Meditating will work for some. Praying and naming will work for others. Going on retreat, making a pilgrimage, creating or building something will work for other people. But she offered another idea that I had never heard of before. She talked about the concept of poustinia. A poustinia is a Russian word to describe a small cabin where one goes to pray and fast alone in the presence of God.

This Russian Orthodox practice is about purposefully moving away from the world in order to get to the centre of your life. Imagine a secret room or a small cabin in the woods where one goes in order to be gifted with God's presence in silence and solitude.

It all sounds so wonderful, to get away from everything. But the reality we face is a busy schedule and a full calendar. It's hard for many of us to get time away from all of the demands and from the people who need our time and care. So Jean Stairs recommends finding points for poustinia in the midst of daily routine. She talks about finding a bench in the middle of a park and going there just to sit. Or putting down the TV remote and looking out your window for a while. Or staying in bed when you awake, for a few extra minutes, and just lie still, think about everything you are grateful for at that moment in time. Or read a Bible story and try to sort out what it's saying to your life. Start a journal - write out your prayers.

It's knowing God by making yourself receptive and listening. Even if it is only for five or ten minutes. Make yourself still.

Another idea she offers is to consciously invite the holy into your chores. It's a way of offering up the most ordinary pieces of your life to God.

A few months ago, I came home one evening, and my beloved, Jack, was telling me about watching an interview with Bob Yates.

"Who is Bob Yates?" I asked.

“You know... the computer genius.”

“Bob Yates: I don’t know who you mean.”

“You know... the richest guy in the world.”

“Oh, you mean Bill Gates.” In twenty five years of marriage I have acquired the skill of speaking Jack-anese.

“Did you know that Bill Gates, the richest man in the world, actually makes his own bed every morning, and he washes his supper dishes every night? He talked about how these simple practices keep him connected to his life, and to all life. When you are that rich, you have to do things to keep it real.”

Since that strange conversation, I have been thinking that doing simple chores, like making the bed, washing the dishes, folding laundry, weeding the garden, going to get the mail, taking my evening walk, are actually holy opportunities for me to make connection with God by listening to my soul. I have a friend who learned when she was off on stress leave from a very difficult job, that the thing that helped her heal most was making soup. Every couple of days she would make a pot of soup, and the acts of gathering, chopping, measuring, stirring and eventually enjoying became the thing that healed her broken spirit.

It’s about finding ways to slow your mind and body down enough to take in your life.

The writer of Psalm 66 reminds us that God is always listening, not from a distance, but from within. Always, there is an inner listening presence that knows us even better than we know ourselves. As we find ways to awaken to this presence, we get that spacious feeling, and from this inner spaciousness, we see that our lives are always lived in the presence of the one who listens, the one who is eternally paying attention and accepts us as we are.

Perhaps this is why the Psalmist concludes with a blessing: “But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.”

A long weekend is the perfect time to listen to your life, listen to your soul. May you make room for a bit of quiet, create a place of peace, set aside some time, and do nothing except be still in the presence of God. Create a bit of a poustinia where you are. Of if not that, see all those dishes sitting in the sink, just waiting to be washed. Notice that the laundry needs to be folded, there is dusting to do. Listen through your chores and make the ordinary moments of your day sacred. This is a weekend for claiming the reminder that God is always listening.

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Sources Used:

Listening for the Soul: Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction, Jean Stairs, Augsburg Fortress, 2000

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, pages 479-483