

Spiritual Practices In A Time Of Seclusion: The Faith Of Elizabeth

If you are like me, this time of seeing one another less frequently has taken its toll on you. Even if you have been working outside of the home or have been out in the world for various reasons during these pandemic days, all of us are living lives marked by more seclusion and isolation than we are used to. Our routines and plans have been disrupted, which impacts our sense of connection with one another.

In our Bible Study Group that meets virtually over the lunch hour on Mondays and Thursdays we have been making our way through the stories of the mothers of our faith. In mid-July we encountered the story of Elizabeth, who was the wife of Zechariah, relative of Mary (Mother of our Lord), and the mother of John the Baptist. Her story, which is found in the first chapter of Luke, mentions that upon conceiving John she enters a time of seclusion that lasts five months. A pregnant Mary is the first person to visit Elizabeth after this time of seclusion, in an episode called “The Visitation”. The Gospel of Luke reads:

“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’”

Upon Mary’s arrival, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and immediately shouts for joy. She proclaims her gratefulness that the “mother of [her] Lord” has come to spend time with her—a statement that matters, because she is the first person other than Mary and Joseph to learn of the coming arrival of the Messiah. Did you notice how she found out about the promise of Jesus? The Holy Spirit was in her midst, and she understood what that meant. Elizabeth wasn’t told by an angel of Jesus’ arrival, nor was she told by Mary—rather, her great faith in God and her trust in God’s love and presence prepared her to be able to feel the Spirit’s presence and to understand (to discern) what it was trying to tell her. Perhaps part of what equipped Elizabeth to notice the Holy Spirit in her midst and comprehend its message was the time she had just spent in seclusion, engaged in prayer. What if this were true of us, too? What if we treated this season of life marked by more silence and seclusion than usual as an opportunity to turn to God in prayer?

It is by practicing prayer—treating prayer like a muscle that we exercise, grow, and strengthen—that we learn how to hear God’s voice in our midst and better understand what the Holy Spirit is telling us. This is a challenge in a busy, bustling, chaotic, over-scheduled, anxious world—we hardly know how to turn off our over-thinking. If we start with baby steps and find unique ways for prayer to play a role in our lives, however, we might begin to more easily notice God’s presence in our midst. We might begin to understand God’s love, plans and hopes for us in new ways.

Elizabeth's faith is a model for us all, teaching us that time spent in prayer can lead us to renewed relationship with God and with others. I encourage you, during this different season, to try out some new prayer practices. Here are some ideas:

- Pause for a moment to think about who has been on your mind recently. Take a moment to consider why you've been thinking about them. Pray for the individual(s). Consider calling or sending a note.
- Be mindful of your breath. As you breathe, pray these words: (Inhale) "Holy Spirit fill me" (Exhale) "Holy Spirit send me".
- Find a way to be generous in your actions, words, and behavior, noticing what is difficult and praying for help.
- Spend time writing down all of the blessings that you can think of in your life, thanking God for each one.
- Take a walk, or look out the window and notice three objects of beauty. What makes them beautiful? How do you feel when you experience the beauty? Offer a word of thanks to God for the beauty in your life.
- Spend one week praying the Lord's Prayer every day, and each day read the explanation of one of the petitions in the Small Catechism (there are seven petitions). If you need access to Luther's Small Catechism, consider downloading the free app from Augsburg Fortress.
- Try the five finger prayer:
 - Thumb: Pray for your family and friends
 - Index: Pray for those who help you
 - Middle: Pray for leaders
 - Ring: Pray for others, especially those who are in need
 - Little: Pray for yourself

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