Christ in the Desert
Encountering Jesus in Silence

We need to find God, and He cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence.
—Mother Teresa

I’d been wondering how to begin my quest to experience God in fresh ways when my phone rang. My friend Carolyn was about to take a retreat to a Benedictine monastery near her childhood hometown. The more she talked about this inconspicuous hermitage nestled in New Mexico’s high desert, the more intrigued I became.

Monastery of Christ in the Desert seemed the perfect starting point for my journey because it is about as different from my suburban Atlanta home as I can imagine. I envisioned orange mesas rising out of the dirt while red-tailed hawks soared overhead. Additionally, a Benedictine monastery is a strange place for a Southern Baptist to search for God because I grew up thinking that Catholics weren’t actually Christians.

I interrupted Carolyn midsentence to declare I’d be joining her on the trip. An adventurous woman by nature, she thought it was a great idea. Less than a month later, my belly full of butterflies, I boarded a plane.

I’d determined to do a silent retreat, taking a vow of quietude from the time of my arrival to departure. The monastery’s Web site tempted me:

The world is immersed in a “noise culture.” People conditioned by this culture have experienced uneasiness and even fear of solitude. Here in the monastery, we hope to help you turn off the “noise” in order to tune in to God. To quote Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God.”

When modern Western Christians want to encounter God, we usually make sound. We sing or preach sermons or pray or attend a Bible study discussion to speak an “Amen.” Taking the opposite approach seemed an appropriate way to begin my spiritual quest. For sixty hours, I would refrain from speaking, taking the Psalmist’s advice to listen for God’s voice rather than talk.

When my plane landed, the sun had risen to the height of my unease. I met up with Carolyn, and we decided to take the scenic route. For almost nine hours, we found excuses to stop by coffee shops, dine at restaurants, and detour to every tourist attraction in the self-proclaimed “Land of Enchantment.” Long after sunset, we spotted a rickety sign with an arrow directing us down a dirt road.

Our car snaked through the dark canyon on the thirteen-mile “driveway” that takes almost an hour to travel. With each tire turn, our cell phone signals faded until they disappeared. By the time we pulled up to the modest guesthouse, I felt totally cut off from civilization.
A wooden gate opened into a courtyard where I picked up a Coleman lantern and made my way to the door bearing my name. The room reminded me of a jail cell, similar in size with cold concrete floors and walls. A handmade desk nestled against the back wall under a three-foot square window, which let in the tiniest bit of moonlight. A string of rosary beads fell limp over a petite chair and a bearably soft twin bed lay underneath just enough blankets to keep a guest from catching cold. A wooden medallion on a leather band was draped atop my bed pillow with a note taped to it:

Gentle Guest: If you wish to observe a stricter silence during part or all of your time here, WEAR THIS MEDALLION. The other guests and monks will respect your desire for silence. If someone does not respect your silence, please let us know.

When you leave, please leave this medallion for the next guest who may also wish to have silence.

Thank you! God bless!

(I learned quickly during my stay that I needed to keep the necklace with me at all times. The second day, I forgot to wear it and stopped by the kitchen to fill a water bottle. One of the older monks asked me how my stay was going. When I only smiled in response, he joked to another guest that I was “hard of hearing.” I bit my lip.)

“Well, friend,” I said, sizing up my new companion. “It looks like you and I are going to be spending a good bit of time together.”

Having spoken my last words, I placed the medallion around my neck and unpacked my clothes.

The next morning, I woke before dawn to attend a prayer service in the oratory. Still half-asleep, Carolyn and I chose seats close to the wood-burning stove to steal a little heat while the monks, dressed in black hooded robes, filed in one by one. I fought to avoid commenting on the unusualness of the setting or how much I wished to be back in my bed, literally having to press my lips like a clamp at one point.

When I decided to travel to Christ in the Desert, I knew I was in for a bit of a shock. After all, a saying among monastery dwellers is, “If there’s anything you need, let us know and we’ll teach you to live without.” But crossing the boundary from the noisy world to a silent space was more startling than I expected. The transition from rush to hush is not easy. Like pulling the emergency brake on a semitruck in full motion, my body screeched to a halt. With every step, my mind raced to fill the void. I’d say prayers in my head, but found I could only fill the space for a few seconds. I’d try to sit still but my knees would bounce, and I’d want to pace. Perhaps this whole silence thing wasn’t such a good idea after all.

As the service progressed, the sun began to rise and my soul began to settle. Through the windows above, beams of light uncovered mountains hidden by darkness moments earlier. Each cliff a riot of white and red hues smearing down their rocky faces as if they’d been painted just before a rain shower. I felt like Dorothy must have when she opened the storm-beaten door and first experienced Oz in Technicolor.

My mind rejoined the service just as the monks were singing from Psalm 51: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and put a new and loyal spirit in me.” And then from Psalm 63: “O God, you are my God, and I long for you. My whole being desires you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.”

Their chants echoed the prayer I’d prayed for God to show up and speak to me. In this liturgy, I felt confirmation that God had heard my request. The tension inside me broke and the grip of worries, frustrations, and expectations loosened. My heart’s ears were now opened.

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Benedictines observe seven offices—or prayer times—a day.1 As Benedict taught, “Let nothing be preferred to the work of God.”2 So prayer is made the top priority. This differs from life on the outside, where we often offer abbreviated or
truncated prayers so we can rush off to work or feed our famished bellies. Not so here, where prayer is the “work” of the monastery.

This also meant my time with them marked the closest I’d ever been to what the apostle Paul called “ceaseless prayer.” In bed, I offered gratitude to God for the day. As I showered in the morning, I asked God’s blessings on the day. When I walked the dusty paths, I pondered gifts for which to thank Him. At worship times, I praised God for being good and gracious and communicative. But best of all were the times when I just listened. This was a new way to pray for me. In His presence, my silence conveyed my trust in and dependence on Him. Sometimes God spoke to my heart and at others He remained as quiet as I. This kind of prayer was not like sitting in front of a transistor radio waiting for a call, but more like wrapping oneself in a blanket fresh out of the dryer. The amazing thing about God is that He can say so much without saying anything at all.

Morning prayer is followed by breakfast, usually a slice of homemade bread smeared with peanut butter, in the refectory. All meals are eaten in silence, but the light meal (usually dinner) was accompanied by classical music and the main meal (usually lunch) featured a monk reading aloud from books like Chesterton’s *Aquinas*—highbrow works that used words like “sophistry” and “fastidious” as if they were common conjunctions.

In the Benedictine tradition, you make a vow to the place, not just the order. These monks have committed to life with this community, an obligation that nonmonastic Christians like myself could learn from. I’m tempted to treat my faith community like a pair of blue jeans—something I’m keen to keep around so long as it stays in fashion or fits me or makes me look good.

This vow also teaches them to resolve issues. No other option is available. When you eat in the refectory, there is no hierarchy, and monks are not allowed to sit in cliques. Everyone sits according to how long they’ve been a part of the community. If the monk next to you slurps his soup, you best learn to get over it. He may be slurping in your ear for the rest of your life.

The monks’ established rhythms of prayer, meals, and chores provided a new perspective on scheduling my day. Time, in modern life, seems an enemy. I struggle against him and wish to stretch him. I choke every last second out of him and then curse him for not providing more of himself. I grow frustrated as I “race against time” and “wonder where time went.” Whatever time may be, he is not a friend.

But in this place, time is embraced as an honored companion. He is directed and maximized. The sun rises during morning prayer, washing the altar with incense-soaked rays. It sets during evening prayer as guests ready themselves for the evening meal. At the monastery, guests learn to settle into time’s natural grooves. To move with it, rather than against it. Time is geared toward purpose, not productivity.

At the end of each day, I felt as if every moment had been properly stewarded. The day wasn’t a minute longer, but it seemed richer. The day was no longer governed by unexpected stimuli but rather prioritized rest and study, worship and work.

When I wasn’t attending a prayer service or eating with the monks, I’d wander the grounds—reflecting, observing, listening for God’s voice. The desert is visibly and audibly deafening. The sun’s rays dance off the landscape and continue until dusk, when they too break for rest. The world was so still that I started wondering if I’d heard the animals whispering to each other from behind the bushes.

I started to realize that this wasn’t such a strange place to encounter God after all. In Scripture, the desert is often God’s chosen meeting place. He called Abraham and commissioned Moses in the desert. He led John the Baptist to dwell there,
converted Paul there, and allowed Jesus to be tested there. With God, the desert often becomes a sacred space, and in each divine desert encounter, the person leaves changed.

Maybe God meets people in the desert for a reason. The vastness of its scale reminds me of my smallness. Its immortality—the desert remains as it was since before I existed and will remain until those final days—uncovers visitors' finitude. In an age where everything is torn down and rebuilt in perpetuation, the desert reminds us that some things are forever and that blessings live all around us. The mountains stretch halfway to the sky, reminding visitors that every bird, every tree, every sunset, provides reason to genuflect.

The desert is also wild and dangerous. One must look out for rattlesnakes and potholes. In the desert, a rainstorm can wash out a road without warning, and a drought can choke out life. Winds can blind, and wildlife can strike if unexpectedly threatened. Extreme temperatures are the norm—hot days reach the boiling point and nights dip into the teens or lower.

Like God, the desert moves as it wishes, and all who dare to encounter it must heed its warnings. A guest who went hiking alone now rests in the monastery's graveyard as a warning to all who treat her flippantly. Coyotes howled just outside my window at night, and if you step in the wrong ant pile, you might never step again. Such a setting forces visitors to walk on their tiptoes.

On Sundays, the monks have a full Catholic mass—something I felt uneasy about partaking in but was too curious to skip. So I joined Carolyn in our regular seats next to the woodstove. With wide eyes, I soaked up the prayers, inhaled the incense, and pondered the icons and imagery, all the while waiting to hear the abbot’s sermon.

Strangely, he preached about the end times, something I would have expected from an evangelical pastor, not a Benedictine monk. He said the whole world will end one day, but in a sense, it is ending all the time. We can die at any moment, and somewhere someone is gasping for their final breath.

"God wants you awake," the abbot said, "so wake up from your stupor. He has given you another chance today to accept His gift of grace and give Him back your life."

The sermon included one of the simplest and clearest articulations of the Christian good news that I’d ever heard. His description of grace shattered my childhood notions of Catholics as work-based apostates, and left Carolyn wiping tears from her chin.

For sixty hours, I lived alert, listening for the divine voice. One afternoon, my feet crunched along the gravel path through the guesthouse courtyard, where a charred log had been set upright and carved into a statue of a monk. His branch-hands stretched heavenward and a rope tied around his middle section served as a belt. I sat in a small chair in the log-monk’s shadow as the sun was setting, listening to the sounds of my breathing. And that’s when my heart heard it.

"Rest in me."

I had been reading the Gospel of Matthew earlier—“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”—and this seemed to echo that exhortation. I needed to stop and . . .

Rest.
For months, I'd been rushing rather than resting. As my workload increased, my spiritual and social lives were being squeezed and snipped. But God wanted me to pause. To take a spiritual and physical breather. In Him, no less. I had busied myself, trying to build a career and sustain a social life, and I was running on empty. But God reminded me that He wanted to take all that weariness and burden from me and replace it with a more trusting disposition.

I won't write of every shared moment with God while at the monastery. Doing so would somehow violate the intimacy we enjoyed. Besides, describing with words what happens when one meets God in silence is something of an impossible feat. It can only be experienced. But these first words God spoke to my heart are hard to keep to myself.

Perhaps God had been speaking these words for weeks or months, but only now was I able to receive them. Could I have heard these words anywhere? Maybe. God can shout over noise. But being in a silent state helped me to hear, unclogging my ears. Without the raucous world around me, I could discern God's voice. As the monks often remind their guests, "One cannot listen to the Divine while one is talking."

Inhabitants of the modern world often fear silence and solitude. Having bathed in chaos, quiet spaces become a kind of wilderness or uncharted frontier. We run from soundlessness because it makes us most uncomfortable.

Recently, I tried yoga for the first time. I found the most difficult pose not to be downwar

d-facing dog or warrior, but the first. The pose where participants must be still and listen to the sound of their own breathing. I preferred the pain of twisted and stretched sinews to the peace of stillness. But I’m like most people, I guess, whose first inclination when they see silence approaching is to turn and run.

As my desert retreat taught me, in those moments I must resist the desire to flee and instead pursue God there, expecting that when I listen He will speak.

Interestingly, when the noise of life drives me to the brink of insanity, I often self-medicate with more of the nasty virus. I turn on music or a film. I call a friend and yap for a while. When this doesn't help, I assume this must be my lot in life. If only I could embrace more hushful moments, I might discover that freedom is just two closed lips away.

For the Christian, silence is more than an effort to retreat from noise. It is an opportunity to lean into God. To sense His presence in life, to notice the contours of His intervention, to express our reliance on Him.

"It's good to spend time in silence," one monk told me. "So long as you've got one ear tuned to the Lord."

Self-induced quietude is not a doorway to descend into oneself. Rather than brooding introspection, it creates worship turned outward and upward. Solitude is not an attempt to run away from life’s noise and distractions as much as an attempt to run to the God who often waits beyond such things. Before I came to the desert, I believed a monastery to be a place one went to empty themselves of pleasure and desire, but I could not have been more wrong. This was a filling station, not a siphon.

That is why the monks guard it so fiercely. They have a strict ban on instruments and radios and cell phones. They want silence to be as commonplace inside the monastery as chaos is outside of it. Even the pace of the prayers often takes visitors off guard, so the monastery offers the following advice:
“When we leave the monastery, it is the outside world that seems to be rushing along too quickly. Slow down, brothers and sisters. God is not going anywhere.”

In the Gospel of Luke, we stumble across a crusty old priest named Zechariah. I imagine him hunched over with knuckles hardened by rheumatoid arthritis, faithfully executing his duties in the temple despite the pains of old age. Zechariah's feet shuffle from the sacrificed flesh to the altar day after day. At home, his wife, Elizabeth, fights off depression. She is barren, shamed in the eyes of the community due to never having given birth.

One day, Zechariah's division is on duty and, according to Jewish custom, his lot is chosen to enter the temple and burn incense. Crowds of worshipers are praying outside, but his failing ears can barely hear their muffled voices. When his hand stretches to set fire to the incense, he notices another figure standing next to the altar. Something is different about this man—so different that Zechariah knows he has not merely wandered in. This is an angel of the Lord, a fact that forces the priest to fall to the floor.

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you shall call his name 'John,'” the angel declares. “And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at His birth, for He will be great before the Lord.”

Luke says Zechariah is a righteous man, but the spirit of Father Abraham wells up inside of him. Doesn’t he know how old we are? My wife and I are pruney, dried-up, no longer able to conceive a child. Maybe a younger man was supposed to draw the lot today.

Then the angel responds to Zechariah’s disbelief in the most peculiar way:

“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you the good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

Having first encountered this passage as a child, I assumed God was punishing Zechariah through Gabriel for probing the prophecy further. After all, I thought, God dislikes being questioned. But after encountering the Bible more broadly, I think more might be happening here. After all, Scripture records many questioners who are not disciplined. Mary even questions the same angel at her annunciation and is not struck silent.

I now wonder if striking Zechariah mute was both a punishment and a gift. Rather than simmering over being questioned, maybe God knew Zechariah better than we. The priest's flapping jaws were busy speaking, inquiring, and arguing, and God knew that he needed to stop talking in order to fully hear what God was saying, in order to receive what God was about to do in his midst.

Jesus also knew the importance of intentional quiet when discerning God’s voice, and we have record of Him seeking it out more than half a dozen times. Sometimes Jesus would climb a mountain, at others He would take a wilderness retreat or a boat ride. But often Jesus would withdraw to what the Gospelers called “a lonely place.”

Jesus wasn’t alone in seeing the value of such things. Isaiah prophesied, “In repentance and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and trust.” Zechariah demanded, “Be silent, all people, before the Lord.” Habakkuk stood silently beside the city guard post listening and looking for God. Once Elijah put the kibosh on his whining, he heard God come in a “still, small voice.” After Paul was converted, he didn’t begin preaching. He went to Arabia for a quiet retreat of his own.
With such a rich tradition, no wonder ancient Christians practiced silence and solitude more often than we. A group of Christians called the Desert Fathers and Mothers fled to the wildernesses of Syria, Egypt, and Palestine in the third century. Here they lived in caves, on mountaintops, and in abandoned tombs. They took drastic measures to rely on God, trust in God, and listen for God's voice—all the while promoting neighbor-love as an alternative lifestyle. They kept the Bible close to their hearts, interpreting it, not just through scholarship, but also by attempting to live it out.

By living in lonely places, the Desert Fathers and Mothers embodied a practice many Christians have long since forgotten. But during my visit to the desert, I couldn't help feeling that I’d connected with them in some way. And with Zechariah, for, like the old priest, I'd discovered that what first seems like difficulty is often a present in disguise.

The dawning sun was just beginning to peek through my bedroom window as I packed my bags to depart. When I arrived several days earlier, my muscles were tense from stress and I carried a suitcase full of anxiety. Now I felt relaxed and refilled. From the abbot's sermon at mass to God’s urging to rest in Him, I felt like I’d had a genuine encounter with God in a way I'd never imagined possible. I went looking for an “aha” moment with flashes of light and a baritone voice from heaven. But instead, I experienced an “ahhh” moment.

Yet, what I experienced at the monastery can be had in other places as well. The same posture can be nurtured in cities and suburbs as in the desert. Christian mystic Henri Nouwen said that while we may withdraw to physical solitude for periods of time, what really matters is “solitude of the heart.” And I felt like I had achieved this. Or at least grazed it. But I didn't feel like I had to abandon it just because I was departing.

Pilgrims mustn’t trek to a wilderness cloister. They can turn off the TV and stop creating background noise. They can replace an hour of video games or Internet surfing with a moment or two engaging Scripture. They can take time to pause and ponder the good works of God that are too easily overlooked. And they can learn to grow comfortable with God in lonely places, much like our Lord did.

After my experience, I'm convinced I need to embrace regular times of silence in life. Not passive silence, where the back is turned and the arms are folded, but active silence, where my ears are open and palms are turned toward the sky. Maybe God waits to meet me in that space, though I had never conceived of such a thing.

After my bags were packed, I grabbed the wooden medallion dangling from my neck. He and I had been nearly inseparable during my stay, and I considered taking him with me. We'd spent so much time together, and I didn't want to say farewell. But in the end, I knew the next pilgrim needed him more than I. So I slid him over my head and placed him atop the pillow where we'd first met.

My only regret was that I never got to say good-bye to everyone. I wished I could have spoken with Brother Andre, the guestmaster who’d made me feel so welcome. Or the abbot, whose honest sermon had split me in two. Or the baker, whose crusty loaves gave me strength to face each day. Before departing, I wish I could have told them thanks.

But maybe I didn't need to. They'd seen me arrive and depart hundreds of times. Wanderers of various names who'd come to the desert with butterflies in their bellies and left with full hearts.

NOTES

1. They take the Bible literally, and David says, “Seven times a day I praise you.” (Ps 119:164) They pray once at night—“at midnight I praise you” (Ps 119:62)—and at dawn.
3. 1 Thess 5:17 c.f. Luke 18:1
4. “Your very silence shows you agree,” Euripides once said. God has said he can be trusted, that he will speak. And silence demonstrates that we agree.
5. Kathleen Norris describes the same observation in her book *The Cloister Walk*: “Gladly, my perspective on time has changed. In our culture, time may seem like an enemy: it chews up and spits out with appalling ease. But the monastic perspective welcomes time as a gift from God, and seeks to put it to good use rather than allowing us to be used up by it.” (p. xix)
8. Isaiah 30:15
10. Some fled the new invention called Christianity, which was little more than a state-blessed religion perpetuated by Emperor Constantine. This pseudo-Christianity promised status and prosperity rather than self-giving sacrifice. “[The Desert Fathers] exposed the underside of a form of religion that fuels our hunger for self-centered living,” noted Bradley Nassif in *Christianity Today*.
11. It is important to note that they did not abandon gospel proclamation or evangelism. They didn’t turn inward. In Syria, for example, Saint Simeon preached from a forty-foot column and converted many Bedouins to Christ (see Bradley Nassif in *Christianity Today*).