Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves

Creak, Creak, Creak
That was the sound of my very first deserted place.
It was a swing set at a nearby school
A place I could go when my 16 yo self
needed time and space away
from the pressure of friends and family

The school was near the church I was attending at the time
So it had some reflected holiness in my adolescent mind
Mostly it was a place to be still.
A place I could stop doing and listen to God,
To the still small voice of the Spirit in my heart
To my own fears, questions, doubts, hopes

Come away to a deserted place and rest a while

That’s Jesus invitation in today’s gospel
Certainly Jesus and the disciples needed some time away
They needed to be all by themselves, away from the crowds of people
All of whom wanted something – hope, healing, teaching, answers

Jesus and the disciples needed some stillness,
a deserted place
They needed to reconnect with the Creator of all
The Most High
The God whose reign of justice and peace they were trying to embody.

Why?

Jesus’ cousin John had just been beheaded by Herod
It was a time of grief and loss.
The disciples had just come back from their mission trip.
They were still amped up because they had cast out demons and cured the sick. They had a lot of experiences to unpack.
All of them needed to step away from the tumult so they could hear God.
So they could make some sense out of everything that had happened.
It’s hard to listen well in the midst of the chaos.
Jesus knew this.
The gospels show us he had a well developed pattern of going off to a quiet place to pray.
Jesus, a good Jew, knew his Scripture.
He knew the story of Elijah who went off to the mountain to hear God
And stood in the mountain cave expecting God to speak in the strong wind, or the blazing fire or the earthquake
God spoke in the still small voice.

Our lives are often so full of demands and activities
Rather like the crowd pressing around Jesus and the disciples when they get out of the boat in today’s gospel.

Like Jesus we have to choose how to respond to the demands of life

Jesus could respond with compassion because he was deeply grounded in God. There was a rhythm to his life.
He regularly took time to rest in the stillness of God’s presence.

As his disciples we are called to do the same. To develop a rhythm of “going away” to a deserted place to spend time with God.

Because we’re physical, bodily creatures it helps if there’s some consistency in what we use for our deserted places.

I’ve had a number of them since that early experience with the school swing set
The marina by the Niagara River
A house on Lake Erie
A garden under a historic Valley Oak tree
They have some common elements: movement, water, being in creation

Sometimes it’s as simple as a rock or piece of driftwood that sits on my desk that reminds me of those places. It says this is the place, this is the time.

The goal is not going to a deserted place. The goal is making space for us to encounter the still small voice of the living God, just like Elijah and Jesus. Being in a deserted outer place facilitates our inner experience.

Francis of Assisi encouraged his followers to make a dwelling place for the Most High within themselves. (TOR 8)

That deserted place to which Jesus invites his disciples is a means to the end of making a dwelling place for God within your heart. Because we are physical beings we need concrete physical ways to do that: places, movement, music. It helps us if we use the same place or do the same thing over and over again.

Repetition in place or practice reminds us what we’re trying to do.

Practices that help us step aside and listen to God’s still small voice.
Practices that build a dwelling place for God within us.

What’s your deserted place?
What practices help you hear God?
What keeps you anchored in God’s love
Able to be compassion when the demands of the crowd
The world, your family press in on you?

Why does this matter now?

There’s been a lot of tumult in our world lately
Lots of things pressing on us that make it hard to be still and listen
Hard to respond from our authentic loving selves.

As a community, we at Trinity are in a time of change, entering a process of discernment.
We can only do this together.

Like the disciples on the boat with Jesus we have been through a lot in the past few years.
The demands of the world around us are not going to stop while we step aside to listen to God and one another, While we unpack what has happened And discern our vision for the years ahead.

Our families will still have needs, sometimes even crises World leaders will say and do things that concern us. Global issues of injustice will continue to demand our attention. Things around here still need to get done. All these things can press on us, much like the crowd pressed on Jesus.

Like Jesus, we need strong practices which root us in God Individually and communally, we need practices that help us stop and listen

_In his sermon in the earlier services, Dean Richardson encouraged us all to read the book Listening Hearts. Listening Hearts talks about developing those practices which build a dwelling place for God in us, Practices which enable us to engage with compassion when that’s needed and step away when that is called for._

Jesus invites us, Come away with me and rest a while. Become a dwelling place for God Who empowers us to live with compassion