

# Resources for Churches...

## Responding to the Coronavirus

### Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest

The apostles returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no time even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. Mark 6:30-32

It had been a busy time. The disciples had been on the go day after day, from dawn till dusk, preaching, driving out demons, anointing people with oil and seeing God doing amazing things. They had so much to tell Jesus when they got back, and even then there was no let-up – not even time to grab a quick meal. So Jesus says, 'Come on, then. Time for a rest'.

Doing is important. Following Jesus' instructions to take the good news to the nearby villages was important work. But doing was not the only important thing. So too was spending time with Jesus, being fed and getting rest. We can only run on empty for so long. Without times for our souls to be restored, our service for God soon starts to seem like a joyless chore. When we ignore the 'one thing that is needed', we end up getting 'worried and upset about many things' (Luke 10:38-42), driven by our agenda and not God's (Isaiah 55:8).

We now find ourselves in a lonely place. Admittedly, it feels like a place we have been forced into unwillingly by this current pandemic and our government's regulations, but that does not mean that it cannot also be a place to which Jesus has led us to do us good. That this might be the very place we need to be just at this moment for nourishment and rest. Somewhere away from all the busyness where we learn to sit at his feet, listen to his voice and enjoy his nearness, and as a result are refreshed. A quiet place where we find our lives being reordered according to God's agenda, where our wills become more in tune with his, and where our minds are opened to new understanding of his purposes.

Lonely places, devoid of human contact, can be sad places. Our present experience is that of missing others' company - the connecting, the sharing, the repartee and the laughter. But being lonely is not the same as being alone. Although we are isolated from so many of our loved ones, God in Christ is with us. God has revealed himself to us as 'I am', the One who is characterised by presence (Exodus 3:14), the One who sends his Son as 'Immanuel', 'God with us' (Matt 1:21-23) and the One who promises to be with us to the end of the age (Matt 28:20). Moreover, Jesus himself found lonely places to be best for communing with his Father (Mark 1:35). Being alone with one person means we can give them our full attention, we can listen without their voice being drowned out, and we can speak without distraction. But most of all, we can relish simply being with them, having a togetherness that doesn't require words, an intimacy where you just 'know'. So whether lonely places are deliberately sought out, received as an invitation, or accepted as a gift when they unexpectedly arise, far from being places of absence and sadness, they can in reality all be places of presence and joy.



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For Jesus, lonely places were also ideal for finding rest. To reach them you had to stop working and pause the normal routine. As human beings made in the image of a God who rested, we are internally configured to require rest. In the Old Testament, God's provision for rest and communion with him was through the Sabbath – a day after six days of work when everything stopped, mirroring his resting on the seventh day of creation (Genesis 2:2-3). Also prescribed, but not necessarily observed, was the practice of observing a Sabbath year (Lev 25:2-7). After six years of growing crops and living off the land's produce, the people of Israel were to allow their fields to lie fallow. All the work of ploughing, planting, tending and harvesting was to stop. This is clearly good horticultural practice, preventing the land from being depleted of nutrients and a decline in soil fertility, but it also has parallels with our spiritual health. Lengthier times to stop have the potential to do in us something deeper than observing a weekly Sabbath. When the fields of our lives are left bare to rest, then the process of renewal and the restoration of vitality can begin. There is space to deal with weeds and unwanted matter, things that have lain hidden within us but which now rise to the surface, things such as bitterness, unforgiveness, or anger. And there is time for us actually to stop long enough to hear, maybe for the first time, God telling us we are precious, valuable to him, loved for who we are, not for what we do, and for us to blossom as a result.

So if we can regard this period of lockdown not so much as an unwelcome imposition, but more as a gift of a Sabbath 'year', instead of merely hankering for it to be over as soon as possible, we can be open to its holy dimension. It can be for us a time set apart for God (Exodus 20:13-14), when our covenant relationship with him is strengthened, and in which we do indeed take delight and find joy (Isaiah 58:13-14). Something that will nourish and fortify us for years to come – an investment in our future fruitfulness. A time in which God does something inside us far more than we can ask or even imagine (Eph 3:20).

As Martha, Mary and the disciples discovered, there are times when Jesus sends us out to work, and times when he invites us to rest. Instead of filling lockdown with new versions of busyness, we too can accept Jesus' invitation to rest. We too can choose what is better.

Read Mark 6:30-32 slowly several times more. Hear Jesus' words speaking to you.

What difference does it make for you that Jesus is present with you in this lonely place?

Consider the Sabbath rhythm of work and rest in your life. Do you devote as much importance to the resting as to the work? How could this be changed?

Ask God to reveal to you how he would like to use this time of lockdown for nourishment, refreshment and renewal in your life.

Pray using the words of Ephesians 3:16-21.