The Jogging Monk and the Exegesis of the Heart

During my second year of seminary, the spiritual moorings of my life came loose. Earlier, before starting seminary, I had asked the spiritual writer Henri Nouwen which seminary would best nurture my spiritual life. “None of them,” he responded. “That will mostly be up to you.”

After a year and a half, I learned the truth of his words. I decided to go on a five-day silent retreat at an Episcopalian monastery in the Northeast to try to reclaim the spiritual warmth I had somehow lost.

Upon arrival I was assigned a monk who would be my spiritual director for one hour each day. He walked into our meeting room with jogging clothes on underneath his cowl. I was disappointed. I had been expecting an elderly man, bearded to his knees, who would penetrate my soul with searing blue eyes. Instead, I got “the jogging monk.”

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My director gave me only one task for the day: Meditate on the story of the Annunciation in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel. I walked back to my cell wondering how I would occupy my time with only this one assignment.

After all, I thought to myself, I could exegete this entire text in a few hours. What was I to do for the rest of the day—in silence?

Back at my cell I opened my Bible to the passage and began reading. “Birth narrative,” I muttered to myself. For the next hour I spliced and diced the verses as any good exegete would do, ending up with a few hypotheses and several hours to sit in silence. As the hours passed the room seemed to get smaller. There was no view to the outside through the window of my room. Other rooms, I would come to find, had a beautiful view of the river that flowed adjacent to the monastery. Without any view to the outer world, I was forced to look within. Despite my hopes of finding spiritual bliss, I never felt more alone.

What else is there?

The next day I met with the monk again to discuss my spiritual life. He asked what had happened with the assigned text. I told him it was just shy of disaster in terms of profound spiritual revelations, but that I had come up with a few exegetical insights. I thought my discoveries might impress him.

They didn’t.

“What was your aim in reading this passage?” he asked.

“My aim? To arrive at an understanding of the meaning of the text, I suppose.”

“Anything else?”

I paused. “No. What else is there?”

“Well, there’s more than just finding out what it says and what it means. There are also questions, like, What did it teach you? What did it say to you? Were you struck by anything? And most importantly, Did you experience God in your reading?”

He assigned the same text for the next day, asking me to begin reading it not so much with my head, but more with my heart.

I had no idea how to do this. For the first three hours I tried and failed repeatedly. I practically had the passage memorized, and still it was lifeless and I was bored. The room seemed even smaller, and by nightfall, I thought I would go deaf from the silence.

The next day we met again. In despair I told him that I simply could not do what he was asking me to do. It was then that the

wisdom beneath the jogging clothes became evident: "You're trying too hard, Jim. You're trying to control God. You're running the show. Go back and read this passage again. But this time, be open to receive whatever God has for you. Don't manipulate God; just receive. Communion with him isn't something you institute. It's like sleep. You can't make yourself sleep, but you can create the conditions that allow sleep to happen. All I want you to do is create the conditions: Open your Bible, read it slowly, listen to it, and reflect on it."

I went back to my cell (it had a prisonlike feel by now) and began to read. I found utter silence. After an hour I finally shouted, "I give up! You win!" though I am not certain at whom I was shouting. I slumped over in my chair and began to weep. I suspect it was for my failure that God had been waiting.

Let it be to me

A short time later I picked up the Bible and read the passage again. The words looked different, despite their familiarity. My mind and heart were supple as I read. I was no longer trying to figure out the meaning or the main point of the passage, I was simply hearing it.

My eyes fell upon the famous words of Mary, "Let it be to me according to your word," her response to God's stunning promise that she would give birth to his son. *Let it be to me*. The words rang in my head. And then God spoke to me. Some might say it was "all in my head" or "just my imagination," but how else does God speak?

It was as if a window had been thrown open and God was suddenly present, like a friend who wanted to talk. What followed was a dialogue about the story in Luke, about God, about Mary, and about me. I wondered about Mary—her feelings, her doubts, her fears, and her incredible willingness to respond to God's request.

This prompted me to ask (or the Scripture moved me to ask) about the limits of my obedience, which seemed meager in comparison to Mary's. "Do not be afraid," said the angel to Mary. We talked about fear. What was I afraid of? What held me back?

Like Augustine, who turned to the Scriptures after hearing a voice say, "Take up and read," I had reached the end of my rope and was, for the first time in a long time, in a position to hear. There is much to be said for desperation, as desperation led me to begin praying.

"You have found favor with God," the angel told Mary. Had I found favor with God? I sensed that I had, but not because of anything I had done (humility had become my companion in that room). I had found favor because I was his child.

I wondered, too, about the future, about my calling. What was God wanting of me? Mary had just been informed of her destiny. What was mine? We talked about what might be—what in fact, could be, if I were willing. *If I were willing*.

Like Augustine, who turned to the Scriptures after hearing a voice say, "Take up and read," I had reached the end of my rope and was, for the first time in a long time, in a position to hear. There is much to be said for desperation, as desperation led me to begin praying. My prayer was really a plea: Help me. After an hour of reflecting and listening, Mary's "Let it be to me according to your word" eventually became my prayer. The struggle had ended. I had a feeling that I had just lost control of my life, but in that same moment, had finally found my life.

The room that had seemed small now seemed spacious. The fact that there was no view no

longer mattered. The view was wonderful from my vantage point. The silence no longer mattered, no longer made me anxious, but rather, seemed peaceful. And the terrible feeling of being alone was replaced by a sense of the closeness with a God who was "nearer to me that I was to myself."

The Word exposed in the words

Before my retreat, I would have laughed if someone had tried to tell met that my real problem was not prayer or meditation or personal discipline, but that it was my inability to read the Bible. After all, to me, an evangelical with a touch of Wesleyan pietism, the Bible was sacred. I had memorized 2 Timothy 3:16 early on as a Christian. When Carl F. H. Henry had come to speak to us at Yale Divinity School on the authority of the Scriptures (Daniel in the lion's den?), I stood by him and championed his cause.

I had studied under brilliant Bible scholars and maintained a high view of authority and inspiration. Even my Bible could attest to the hours I labored to understand it, covered as it was with marginal notes and multicolored "highlighter" markings. Like Paul, I list my achievement to point a finger not at me but at the God who redirected my ways.

Finally, I relearned that reading the Bible requires what the saints of old called "contemplation." It was in solitude and silence that the noise and hurry of the world finally ceased long enough for me to hear.

Quite simply, I had forgotten that there is much more to reading the Bible than merely understanding the words on the pages. Karl Barth wrote of how "the Word is exposed in the words." It was as if the Word—strong and pure, convicting and yet strengthening—now emerged from the words.

Learning how to study the Bible was an important and essential skill. However, I had lost "the ears to hear" anything beyond that kind of study.

I say "lost" because there was a time when I had ears that heard. I was given my first Bible at the age of 16 and I remember vividly how I read the Gospels with a kind of awe, hearing the words as if they were spoken to me. Somewhere along the way I lost those ears, and it took a monk in jogging shoes and a Jonahlike three days of anguish in the belly of a monastery to get them back.

What I relearned in my room without a view was how the Bible should be read, namely, with an ear to what the text might be saying to *me*. Simply doing responsible exegesis is not enough, as enlightening as it often is. The next steps are listening to the text, reflecting on it, asking not merely what it means, but what it is asking of me, what it is asking me to hear.

What I had been unable to understand was what Soren Kierkegaaard called the "contemporaneity" of the Bible. The past dose not merely parallel, but actually interests the present. The Christ who called his disciples to follow him is calling each of us at this moment. I had been reading the Bible as if it were describing a world in which I might find parallels. I now came to understand that when I read the Bible, I am reading about a world that in some sense also now is.

For example, I had been prone to read the story of God's call to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac by saying, "Boy, Abraham sure had a tough decision. I am glad I am not in his shoes." Now I see that I cannot read it only that way. Why? Because I *am* in Abraham's shoes. God sometimes calls me to sacrifice my most precious possession. The story has much to say to the present.

I had to relearn that the Bible is a book aimed

primarily at the will of the reader. I was afraid to hear what the Bible might say because I suspected it might ask me to change my life. It did. When I was "running the show," as the monk observed, I could sidestep the contemporaneity of the Bible. Mary was Mary, and I could observe her dilemma and even write a good sermon about it. But now it was my dilemma. Could I—will I—say, "Let it be to me"?

Finally, I relearned that reading the Bible requires what the saints of old called "contemplation." It was in solitude and silence that the noise and hurry of the world finally ceased long enough for me to hear. There was not enough silence in my life for me to hear the Word within the words, and I knew that deep down, which is why I went on a silent retreat in the first place. Now I have learned that silence is possible outside the haven of a monastery, but I sill have to work to find it.

I also learned that contemplation is more than just silence. The monk's insistence that I stay with the same passage for three days unnerved me. Now I understand what he was trying to do. Contemplation requires deep reflection, repetition, patience, and persistence. The veil that covered my heart would not be removed by a single reading. I needed then, and still need, to read it slowly, until the words strike a chord within me. Once they strike, I am able to let them resonate.

A new world opens up

The end of the retreat was much better than the beginning. My "jogging monk" was pleased to see that I had relearned how to read the Bible. He gave me different passages to meditate on for the remainder of the retreat, and like Mary, I was able to "ponder" them in my heart. I felt what an illiterate person must feel on learning how to read. A new world was opened up.

Seminary, too, became more of a joy. I finished that year and my final year with a new way of looking at the Bible. I found that there can be a happy marriage between textual study and contemplation, viewing them not as competing but complementary. One without the other feels incomplete. Now, five days later, I feel that any day on which I do not open the Bible and let the words descend from my head into my heart, letting them mold my thoughts and shape my prayers, is wasted.

Unlike the room at the monastery, I now have a beautiful view outside my window. Now and then I close the shades.

by James B. Smith

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