

What to give up for Lent? Silent Retreats

What to expect on a silent retreat:

“It is not comfortable at first. You’ll sit in your room alone, having no radio, TV, or anyone to talk with. No one, that is, but yourself and God. Having no noise to hide behind, you will eventually be moved to contemplation, reflecting on the essence of your existence and what it means for you to live your life in the presence of God. It is here, in the silence of your heart, that **God’s Word can come to you with minimal interference.**”¹

Is this true? Not at all. When you are alone in your room, or on a lake or mountaintop, you are not alone with God. The Evil One is also close at hand, deceiving you into thinking you have an inner receptor tuned to the Lord. Or a spark of divinity within you. But you don’t.

None of us do. Rather, we are rebels – totally sinful – even when we don’t **feel** rebellious. Especially when we don’t **feel** rebellious. Then we are caught in spiritual pride. We think we **can hear and do**. We think: “By making myself quiet, I will be able to hear what God wants me to do. I can make it happen.” But you can’t. We can’t.

But what about Psalm 46:10? “Be still and know that I am God.” This verse does not mean that posture, gesture, or place function like TV antennas which help God’s Word “come to you with minimal interference.”

The idea that a silent place is conducive to better reception of God’s Word is really a kind of works-righteousness. As Luther wrote: “One thing is for sure: We cannot pin our hope on anything that we are, think, say, or do.”²

Thus to use Psalm 46:10 to claim that one can by oneself “be still and know that I am God,” as if we can make ourselves receptive and “still,” is to misuse the Bible. As Luther wrote: “If opponents use Scripture against Christ, then we use Christ against Scripture.”³

Luther again: “Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.”⁴

Instead of a silent retreat where the spirit you encounter may be the Evil One who appears as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14) – go to church, that is, a congregation gathered around the cross alone. A fellowship where it is proclaimed that salvation is in Christ alone by faith alone.

¹ *Worship* ’96, November, p.3, ELCA publication, emphasis added.

² *Smalcald Articles* III/3, p.309:36; Tappert.

³ WA, DB 39:1. See WA, DB 40:1, 458-59.

⁴ *Smalcald Articles* III/8, p.313:10, Tappert.