My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Easter resurrection and new starts, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

We’ve heard this Psalm and repeated it throughout our lives, our rituals, our liturgies, and our minds and hearts in good times and bad. The 23rd Psalm remains the penultimate reminder, whatever the denomination and across both Jewish and Christian tradition, of God’s presence. So while we might be tempted to talk about sheep again this Sunday with the shepherd image, I’d like to steer us in a different direction. I’d like us to focus on some other aspects of those opening verses. Lying down in a green pastures. Relaxing by a clear glass body of water. What do we see in our minds? (take all answers).

If we were at an art exhibit or museum we would see these pastoral landscapes and images, broad and wide expanses. And in many of these paintings we would see no birds of the air, beasts of the field, and certainly no humans. The scripture leads us to this image of vastness, and stillness and invites us in. But when I asked some colleagues what stillness means, they defined it not in its attributes, but in its absences. The absence of movement, the lack of noise, the scarcity of civilization’s imprint such as buildings, lights, music, or transportation. Stillness is, for us, an emptiness that sweeps away stimuli for our senses.

And though they are often used interchangeably, the terms “silence” and “stillness” are not synonymous. Silence implies in part an absence of ambient noise, together with an inner state or attitude that enables us to focus, to “center” on the presence of God. And yet, stillness, for those who write our scriptures, is the place where we are called time and time again to find God. There is no absolute absence; in stillness, God is always present. “Be still and know that I am God”. In the wind we hear the “small, still voice of God”.

But silence fosters stillness; it is indispensable for stillness. Inner stillness, however, goes beyond silence. Inner stillness’ aim is to purify the heart and issue pure prayer. That purification involves the body in its entirety, because body and soul, like mind and heart, are ultimately inseparable. In the words of Marcus Eremita, a fifth century ascetic, “The intellect cannot be still unless the body is still also; and the wall between them cannot be demolished without stillness and prayer.”

Silence is the prerequisite for inner stillness, only inner stillness enables us truly to listen to God, to hear God’s voice, and to find God in the depths of our being. Yet silence and stillness are, like prayer itself, gifts that God can and wants to bestow upon us. The greatest truth about us is that God has created us with a profound longing, a burning thirst for union with the divine. We can easily convert that longing into an idolatrous quest for something other than God to fill that longing, such as the yearning for power, status, or money. Yet God remains faithful even in our times of figuring out these things won’t fulfill us.

God always seeks us, though we more and more rarely seek God. But like the prodigal child, God always awaits our return. Once we begin that journey homeward, through repentance and an ongoing struggle against our most destructive passions, God reaches out to embrace, to forgive and to heal in us all that is broken, wounded and wasted. God reaches into the very fabric of our life, to restore within us the image in which we were made, the original promise of Gensis.

Now, at about this point you might be thinking that the virtues of silence and solitude, virtues that lead to stillness, remain the ideal for monks, not me. With the usual demands on our time and the level of noise pollution we all have to deal with at home, in the streets or at our place of work, these virtues are a luxury we cannot afford. Even if we really want to reshape our lives to introduce moments of “sacred time” and “sacred space,” the effort seems to be too much. We are too rushed in the morning, too tired at night, and too busy in between, even to say a few prayers or read a few lines of Scripture. How can we be expected to cultivate silence, solitude and an enduring stillness under such conditions?

But that question is usually rhetorical. It isn’t an actual objection as much as a refusal of our egos to engage or even try, kind of like all those new years’ resolutions that just fall by the wayside a few weeks into January. Our egos hate engaging in the hard stuff. But cultivating these virtues, at least to a modest extent, is very possible. It does require a certain discipline and at first, a great deal of patience. But little by little, the experience of inner stillness creates a longing for God that is self-perpetuating. Gradually it becomes necessary, like eating, sleeping or breathing.

That stillness is a gift of grace. We can’t fake it, but we can take small steps to open ourselves to it. And the Holy Spirit responds to our efforts in unexpected ways.

Each of has to find our own measure of quiet and a disposition toward prayer. For some folks it’s a certain space—a quiet corner for example—and to set as far as possible a fixed time each day. Alone, away from phones and other distractions, we start to do nothing more than breathe. Get into the habit of making time.

Make a conscious effort to relax your muscles and limbs, and breathe deeply and slowly. This isn’t yoga and these aren’t “techniques”; we’re reestablishing a natural harmony between our mind and body that we lost in the frenetic pace we talked about just a little bit ago.

In the quiet, bring your mind and heart to focus on God’s presence. Then allow the Holy Spirit to direct your prayer in whatever way is most appropriate, most necessary. Ask for the forgiveness we talked about last week for those who have we’ve offended or who’ve offended us. Let go of the grievances we spend so much time keeping track of. Pray for others, including those who have offended us, what Jesus calls our “enemies”—those folks who know just how to get to us, with words, actions or deeds, and release that power away from your soul back to God.

Most importantly, pray for this day, be grateful at this time, for God’s presence right here. Focus on the stillness of the water and the green fields, free of words and thoughts. The peace of God descends, and rest in that.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

“Be still and know that I am God.” That stillness, acquired by simple yet faithful discipline and practice, is both the pre-requisite for and the answer to prayer. On the one hand, it gives a way, a movement, a pilgrimage into the depths of our soul, our heart. Once established in that sacred space, it reveals the presence of God and makes God known in all God’s power, majesty and love.

God is stillness, and that wonderment helps us re-find the wonderment of scripture, and why the 23rd Psalm remains loved across all traditions and throughout the centuries. The peace of God guide you this day, and I hope you give it a try. What’s on the other side is so worth it.

Thanks be to God, Amen.