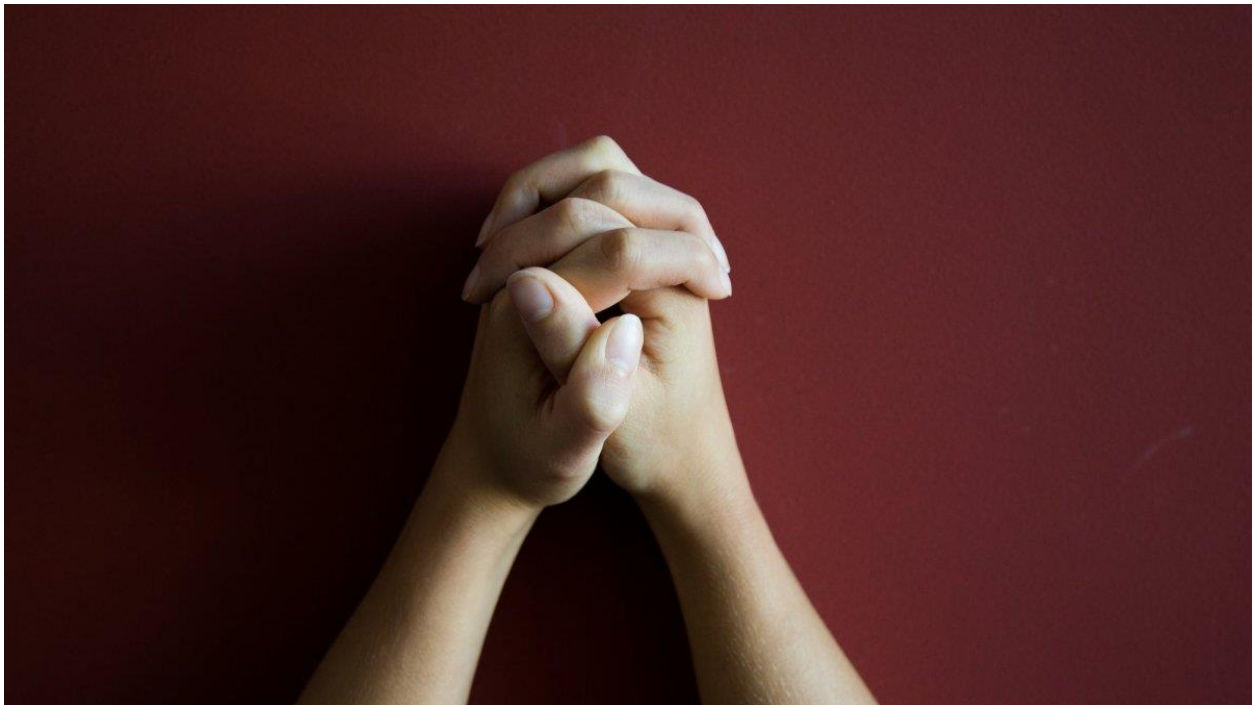


Sermon, January 9, 2022
Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:5-17, 21-22
“Starting Right: A True Connection”
Rev. Dr. Brian Jones, Senior Pastor



Have you ever read something, a title of something, and you read it merely because you know you're going to argue with it? I do that sometimes. Every now and then, I'll read a title of something and read it because I know I'm going to argue with it. It's wrong, and I'm going to prove it. But it doesn't always work out that way. The article said *15 things Introverts are afraid of*. And without reading it, I was automatically offended. Didn't have to go any further than the title. I'm an introvert, and I was ready to take up the cause of my people. By the way, just for reference, introversion and extroversion have nothing to do with how boisterous someone is or if they are shy. It's all about where you get your energy from when you need to recharge. You can be outgoing, love being in front of people, yet be introverted. Just like some people may get all their energy, get charged up by being around people, yet they are the quietest person in the group. But they want to be around people.

And knowing that most articles like this get that part wrong and make Introverts out to be odd, socially awkward neurotics, I was ready to do battle. Imagine my chagrin when they got it right. Yeah, 15 things Introverts are afraid of, and they nailed every single one of them. Hearing *we have an open office here with*

no walls, no dividers. When the teacher says OK, this is a group project. Do we have any visitors here tonight? Let's all do some ice breakers. Introverts do them. They just inside really hate them.

But one of them, I guess, I didn't disagree with it but it was not one I would have thought of. When the internet goes down. The article went on to say that one of the great advantages for people who are introverted in today's world is that using the internet has become a way to stay connected with the entire world and yet not use up one's energy.

And it's not about hiding away from the world, it's about connection. Making a connection in a way that doesn't drain one's energy so they can function in life. As I thought about it, I confess that makes sense. You think about how many people we connect with today all over the world, make friends with people we have never met, have meetings with people all over the world without having to leave one's office or home. But if that connection is interrupted, if we lose that connection, it's like losing one's connection to a larger world.

Staying connected matters, doesn't it? In the world we live in today, I see more and more people working harder to find ways to overcome isolation in order to stay connected. I see people expressing a larger gratitude for being able to connect with other people and spend time with them. Here at our church, we have been working to find better ways to stay connected especially with those who may be a bit more home centered now than they used to be. It's why we get together with family during the holidays. Why we attend reunions, reach out to get ahold friends on social media, why we join interest groups and join with other hobby enthusiasts. It's almost as if we have an innate desire to stay connected.

And when we lose that connection, we suffer for it. We experience great anxiety and depression. We experience a greater sense of isolation. We feel loneliness to a more poignant degree. We feel as if the world is passing us by, people can't hear us and we can't hear them. Why, even losing a connection on the phone is frustrating. We've been overall very lucky with our online worship, but I have some friends who lost connection mid-way through a worship service of an online Bible study, and they were so frustrated because they are doing their best to stay connected with their congregation and they can't because a connection was lost, often through no fault of their own. None of us like losing a connection.

So how is your connection with God in and through the Holy Spirit? We began last week a series called "Starting Right". We said last week we all want to have a better year this year than last. We also noted the growing amount of pessimism in today's society that we will have a better year. We noted that better years don't just happen while we cross our fingers. Either are things we can do to help us have a better year. It's a matter of stewardship in every area of our lives.

If you want to have a better year this year, then you simply must be connected with God. While we didn't make this our first message, I do want to say it might be the most important piece to our having a better year than last year. You simply cannot have a better year than last year without an increased connection with God. Last week, we said we must have Jesus at the center of all things. But knowledge isn't enough, we must have that better connection. I've found that a loss of connection with God leads to the exact same difficulties we mentioned a few moments ago when we lose connection with people. Depression, anxiety, a sense we are being passed by, a greater feeling of loneliness.

We long for what we see in our Gospel lesson this morning at the Baptism of Jesus. We long for the skies to open up, for God's spirit to wrap itself around us, fill us, name us, transform us to hear God say "this is my child". Oh, who doesn't long to be filled with God's love and fire and transforming grace? I want that connection with God. How about you? Do you want to have a greater connection with God as we move into 2022?

Then, please hear this. Connection with God is not a matter of saying OK, God, lay it on me. Connect me. It's not a matter of wishful thinking, wouldn't it be nice if I had a better connection with God because I feel like I lost it somehow. It is, in the end, a matter of a better prayer life. If we look at both of our passages of Scripture written by Luke, we see a pattern forming. If you want a better connection with God, if you want more of His Holy Spirit in your life, it is a matter of having a better prayer life. No one has ever been filled with the Holy Spirit who had an anemic prayer life. If you want to have a better year this year, if you want to be more connected to God, then you must begin to improve your prayer life. It's a matter of being a better steward in the life of prayer.

So, how do we have a better prayer life? Let me give you a few suggestions. First, I want to encourage you to have a daily consistent time of prayer that simply cannot be intruded upon. We have this tendency to try to fit prayer in or try to do it before we go to sleep. Or in the car while we are concentrating on a hundred other things. You can't connect with your spouse or loved ones that way. They long for your full attention. Why do you think that works for God? Whatever works, timewise, for you every day, put it on your calendar, be content about it. Don't let anything interfere.

Secondly, learn to pray with others. On a regular basis. Introvert, extrovert, we are social creatures, we need to pray with people. We need people to pray for us, and we need to pray for others, they need to see that. Praying with others connects us with the Body of Christ. It also allows you to model a prayer life for your children and grandchildren. If they don't see you pray, if you don't pray with them, how will they ever learn to connect with God?

Third, take this year, and at your own pace, read through the book of Psalms. There are 150 Psalms. Reading one a day, you can read through them twice in a year, easily. But don't be in a rush, it's not about making it through them, it's about praying the Psalms. Get into the habit of using the psalm as prayer. Written prayers, even by others, are still prayers and often can better articulate what we are going through.

Fourth, Learn to Shut up. Well, that's not a nice way to say it. But learn to listen. Maybe once a week pray by not saying anything. Listen to God, hear what He has to say to you. Learn to long for and hear His voice. This year be better connected. Pray. Amen.