

I saw a newspaper article the other day. It was discussing a recent increase in the number of people who have taken up meditation. Yes, meditation. That ancient practice of quiet, controlled breathing and a deep inward focus on calming thoughts and peaceful contemplation.

Supposedly, meditation has all sort of benefits. It can reduce your risk of dementia and Alzheimer's. It can lower stress hormones and boost the immune system. Businesses are using it to improve workplace performance. On and on the list goes.

The article got me thinking about meditation's role in Christianity. I know there are some Christians who look at it as simply a form of Eastern mysticism, that has no place in our lives. But then again, the Bible has some things in it that look kinda like meditation. Martin Luther himself was known to refer to the life of a Christian as being one of oratio, tentatio, meditatio. Latin for prayer, struggle, and meditation.

And yet, the more I considered this, the more I realized I was using a definition of meditation that's very different than the one the Bible or Luther were using. And we see that in our Gospel lesson today.

Because here we see Jesus going off into the wilderness once again to be alone. Jesus does this all throughout his ministry. Time after time, Jesus disappears from the public eye in order to find one of his quiet places off the beaten path. We heard about another time during our Gospel lesson just a few weeks ago.

Usually we don't learn much about what he does when he's alone. Sometimes there's a vague reference to his praying or getting away from the crowds or some such thing. Other times, he just vanishes, often to the confusion of his disciples. But this time is different. It's not only the first time that Jesus does this, but it's also the only time that we get to follow him out there and see what happens.

And as we watch him, both in Mark's gospel and in others as well, what happens looks nothing like the modern day definition of meditation. Because Jesus spends the entire 40 days he's out there being harassed by the devil. One temptation after another after another.

Jesus hasn't gone out there for quiet contemplation. He's gone out there to suffer. And it's the devil who wants to make him more comfortable. Jesus has gone into the wilderness to prepare himself for a life of hardship and persecution and rejection. This is a training regimen for Jesus.

And the devil? He wants to make Jesus complacent. To forget his mission and ministry. To turn these stones into bread. To call his angels to protect him. To sit back and let someone else take over.

The devil fails. Of course he fails. But I wonder how many more times he tried. How many of those times that Jesus went into a quiet place were actually all that quiet? How many were really spent sparring with the devil, over and over again?

That's the Christian definition of meditation. In fact, that's exactly what Luther meant when he uses the word "meditatio." When Luther talked about meditation, he was talking about meditating on God's Word. Meditating on it so long and so fully, that you might actually succeed for one brief moment in drowning out the devil's temptations. Because if you're listening to God's voice, you can't hear the devil's voice.

And the devil is always speaking. There is no such thing as quiet meditation for a Christian. There is always something or someone speaking. Whether it's your sinful flesh. Or the sinful world around you. Or the father of sin himself. If you're not listening to God's voice, then there's always something sinful whispering in your ear.

The meditation associated with Eastern mysticism isn't just wrong because it's part of a religion. It's wrong because it tells us to look inward for answers. But the only answers we'll find by looking inward are sinful answers. We have to look outside of ourselves, into God's Word to find something that isn't a temptation to sin.

But we can fool ourselves otherwise. And we're good at it. Boy, are we good at it. Luther liked to say that the devil always has an ally when he attacks us. Because our own flesh is ready and willing to work with him on whatever scheme he comes up with.

And there are lots of ways we do this. But I want to focus on one in particular this morning. And it's called compartmentalization. Maybe you've heard of it before.

I know I've heard it described of politicians, for example. Politicians who compartmentalize their lives, so that the shady, corrupt things they do at work don't interfere with their family and public image. Not so coincidentally, the same can be said of many criminals, who compartmentalize their crimes so that their guilt doesn't overwhelm them.

The reality is, though, that everybody does it. We all try to divide our lives into boxes that don't interfere with each other. In fact, often we try to make them complementary.

So, for example, we can spend the months of November and December gorging on turkey and Christmas cookies, and then spend the months of January and February eating salads and protein shakes. We put them into two separate boxes, and then let them balance each other out. We do the same thing with exercise or stress. The sedentary desk job can be balanced with a gym membership. The stressful career can be balanced with lavish vacations.

Just take whatever is negative in your life. Put it into a box. Leave it there. And then create another box with something equally positive in it. And everything will work out. And, you know, in day to day life, sometimes that works. It's usually not very healthy. But sometimes it really is the best way to solve a difficult situation.

But not when it comes to our faith. Because we often try to do the same thing spiritually. We'll take our faith, put it into a box called "Sunday morning," And then live however we want during the week. And it doesn't matter that we've done this, because it all balances out.

The sinful thoughts, words, and deeds that I committed this past week don't matter as long as I show up to church on Sunday morning. I don't need to worry about the constant whispering in my ear of the world, the flesh, and the devil, because I meditated on God's Word for an hour at church. It doesn't matter whether I have loved God or loved my neighbor, because those are questions for the church box and I'm in the work box right now. Or the family box. Or the school box.

And pretty soon, this compartmentalization becomes an excuse for complacency. Like Jesus in the wilderness, tempted to simply sit back, relax, and let the devil take over, the devil does the same thing to us.

He makes us believe that the Christian life is one of quiet and comfort. Where prayer, struggle, and meditation only occur within the four walls of this building. Where the worship service is the only place where we're challenged to answer difficult spiritual questions and wrestle with difficult spiritual topics. And places like home and work and school are where we can forget all that and get on with our lives.

When in reality, the exact opposite is true. Home and work and school are where the prayer and struggle and meditation take place. Outside these walls is where we're confronted with questions of how to love our God and how to love our neighbor.

Out there is where we must decide what to teach our kids and grandkids. What to watch on television. What to think when we turn on the news. And how to deal with the constant stream of temptation that bombards our senses. Out there is prayer and struggle and meditation.

In here? In here is peace. Not because the devil is silent. The devil speaks just as loudly to you in your pew as he does in your armchair at home. Maybe even louder because he's trying to drown out the Word from God that I'm delivering to you.

No, the peace you find in here is the peace of sins forgiven. It's the peace that comes from hearing God's Word. And seeing his cross. And tasting his body under bread. And smelling his blood under wine. And feeling the cleansing water of Holy Baptism upon your skin.

Instead of having our senses bombarded with temptation, we have them bombarded with God's grace, poured out on the cross. That we might be equipped to fight the good fight for another week.

You see, when it comes right down to it, Jesus didn't go into the wilderness to show us how to escape the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. He did it to show us how to confront them. Because the world – out there – is our wilderness, full of temptation. Full of the devil's attacks.

And our time spent here, in church, doesn't give us permission to become weak and complacent. No, quite the opposite. It trains us to become strong and equipped for every good work. That we might meditate on God's Word and hear his voice and believe his promises and proclaim his love in word and deed to all the world. Amen.