

# Christ in the Wilderness

Hermitage Retreat Center

Fall October 2011

Our mission is to provide an environment that is conducive to silence, solitude, prayer and reflection.

## Solitude

by Elizabeth Wetmore

*(This is the continuation of Elizabeth's story that was started in the summer newsletter.)*

### Five

There is a deeply irreverent bumper sticker that I see around the city from time to time. "Jesus is coming. Look busy!" Generally it amuses me, but on closer inspection I find myself wondering: Might it be possible that, while busyness and the dangers of idle hands and what not certainly have their place in the lives of the faithful (and, really, all of us), there is also a real danger of failing to stop and pause, maybe even to allow a few things to fall by the wayside, so that we may take the time listen to our Merciful Creator? What if it is a sin not to spend some time sitting in a chair, staring into space and watching the prairie come back to life after a long, hard winter? What if it is a sin to not seek solitude regularly? What if one of the most important ways that we, to quote the old country song, "get right with God," is by setting aside the busyness of our lives and handing over our time to our Lord?

I'm no theologian, so I might be on shaky ground here. But I wonder.

### Six

I wandered around the hermitage, unpacked my things, eyeballed the writing desk and made a cup of tea. Then I sat down on the porch and watched the birds for a while. Really, I had so much to do. But once I was in that chair on the porch with a cup of tea in my hand, somehow it seemed more important to stay put. It occurred to me that I had been moving around—both internally and externally—for a really long time. Sort of like an ant, only less purposeful.

St. Bernard said, "If you are preparing the ear of the spirit for the voice of God, a voice sweeter than honey and the honeycomb, then flee external cares; so that when your inner sense is disentangled and free, you may say with the prophet Samuel, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening' (1 Samuel 3:10). For the voice of God does not speak amid the din and bustle of the world, nor is it heard in any public gathering. Rather secret counsel seeks to be heard also in secret. And so because of this, happiness will be given to us if we listen to God in solitude" (cited from "The Practice of Silence and Solitude," opusangelorum.org).

I think of Samuel's moment with God from time to

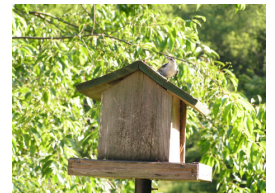
time. 1 Samuel 3:10, in its entirety, reads thusly: Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." In this story, Samuel is able to hear the Lord and the ensuing revelations, perhaps, because he listens to the Lord. And yet it can be very hard to listen when one is caught in the world's "din and bustle." For my part, I walked myself down to the lovely little chapel next to the stream and sat myself down in a chair. I commenced to explain myself to the Good Lord in the clearest and plainest of terms, as if my Creator were a basically well-intentioned but deeply disorganized professor. "Lord," I began, "I've got a lot I need to do in these three days..." I explained my plan for retreat in great detail, not once thinking of good King Solomon and his wisdom in Proverbs: "Where words are many sin is not wanting" and, afterward, I listened attentively. Your servant is listening!

What I heard was the profound silence of the chapel, a bit of wind pushing against the door I had left ajar, and a bird-call, unfamiliar to me but sweet and simple and clean as a plainsong, a mockingbird perhaps. I closed my eyes and a single word came to mind. It even came with its own punctuation. Quiet!

### Seven

Because I visited CITW at the end of April, the birds had returned to the Midwest in all their noisy glory. Minute by minute, they created a messy and complicated symphony outside the door of my hermitage. Two enormous Jays had commandeered the feeder, and a couple of exquisite little Indigo buntings hovered around the perimeter, moving in when the Jays weren't paying attention. Red-tailed hawks hovered above elegantly above it all. Flowers that I am completely incapable of naming were just starting to bloom—tiny purple blossoms peeping at the edges of everything, everywhere. The weather was lovely. We were blessed with warm and sunny days, nights cool enough to warrant a light sweater. There were the usual threats of rain, as there always are in the Midwest this time of year, but neither I nor the turkey that fussed somewhere in the woods, close by, seemed to take them very seriously.

I read on the porch or stared into space. Sometimes, I watched the cloud float by. Occasionally, I walked over and poked my head into the brush just to see if I could spot the



turkey, whose racket was persistent, but the little creature always quieted immediately. It was starting to occur to me that perhaps my whole approach to this retreat had been—how to say this gently—completely wrong.

Nouwen writes, “Solitude is not a spontaneous response to an occupied and preoccupied life. There are too many reasons not to be alone. Therefore we must begin by carefully planning some solitude.” One of the best reasons I can think of to avoid being alone is that, if you haven’t made a habit of solitude, and if as an artist you haven’t fully embraced (or you have forgotten) the necessity of what bell hooks’ in her discussion of the poet Emily Dickinson called “radical solitude,” then you come to a retreat expecting far too much from your time there. In short, you expect the retreat to answer all the Big Questions of your life—gaining a profound understanding of “time management,” earning a living while keeping your creative life alive, staving off the demons of acedia. Worse, you also expect that retreat to solve all the Big Problems of your life as all.

I felt this keenly. In the words of The Avett Brothers, folksingers and occasional theologians, in their song Ill with Want, I had come to CITW “sick with wanting / and it’s evil how it’s got me / and every day is worse than the one before... Something has me acting like someone I don’t wanna be, / acting like someone I know isn’t me.”



### *Eight*

At some point in the middle of my second day, it occurred to me that I had not yet sat down at the work desk in the other room, though I had done a fair amount of reading and praying and walking. I sat on “my” porch at the hermitage, listening to the wind move through the prairie and watching the prairie return to life after our long,

long winter. I walked in woods for hours, just as I used to do in the desert when I was a young woman. There are wonderful trails through the woods, solitary places to sit and watch the deer eating the old corn left on the fields after last year’s harvest. There is a beautiful old metal combine rusting away in the woods, its scythe rendered harmless by time and decay. And if you are very, very quiet, you can hear the gentle bubbling of the brook from just about anywhere on the property.

At end of the second day, after watching the sun set over God’s rich and bountiful creation, I said my thank-you’s and headed back to my hermitage for a little light supper and reading before bed. I slept for nine hours and woke up feeling better rested than I had in months.

I had not realized how tired I was.

### ***In The Wilderness...***

Fall has set in after a brief burst of warm weather a couple of weeks ago. Most of the leaves have fallen from the trees, revealing the sparse landscape. We have recently had many retreatants coming and going. New retreatants are finding their way to CITW by recommendations from friends or

by doing a Google search for retreats in Illinois. We appreciate your spreading the word about the benefits of solitude at CITW.

Our Strings of Faith Concert went very well. We had over 100 guests who came and enjoyed an hour and a half of beautiful religious songs. The singers blended well together and they shared with us their love of music and their talents at playing instruments. The concert was followed by wonderful fellowship and delicious home-made treats.



July 27 brought a night that many in Jo Daviess county would like to forget. We received 15 inches of rain in a 12 hour period. The sheer volume of rain water washed out roads and bridges, flooded homes and businesses, and created a lot of havoc. Randecker Road had a huge impassable gully that took several days to repair.

Even my bedroom in the basement flooded for the second year in a row! This time we had to remove two of the walls because of mold, and we had to repair the outside foundation wall. The process meant digging a 12 ft deep by 4 ft wide hole in order to water proof the outside wall and to lay tiling around the base of the house to carry future heavy rains down the hill to the drainage ditch. Joe Harrington, John Jankowski and Pat Harrington spent many hours chopping through rocky clay soil to accomplish the task. Butch Kuberski, owner of B & H Trenching and Tiling came in and dug the 12 ft trenches that were needed to get the tilling to the drainage ditch. He also provided the rock that was used to backfill the trenches. Thanks to Butch and his helper for the two days of work on short notice, and for the use of their equipment. We appreciate the assistance to get the tiling done.

We have been doing some other erosion control work on the property as well. The road from the parking lot to the main house hill had several inches of dirt put on it to raise the road-bed higher. The dirt was dug out around the openings of the drain tubes. We also installed a donated drain tube across the path through the trees from the main house hill to the garage area. Again, that bed was raised about 15 inches using the dirt that was dug out to create a drainage basin. Eventually a larger drainage basin will be dug out in that area to slow down the water flow when we have large downpours.

The roof replacement on the main house will be finished within the week. With that, we will be done with the repairs for the season. The soil around the main house and the roadways will be seeded so that the springtime will yield a fresh new coat of grass.

If you are longing for some solitude, give us a call. We are open year round and the winter season is beautiful at CITW. Have a great rest of autumn. God bless you with a grace-filled Thanksgiving with family and friends.