Sermon for the 5th Sunday after Epiphany

February 4, 2024

Mark 1:29-39

Mark does not waste time telling his story. We’re not even at the end of chapter 1 – there’s 6 more verses to go – and already he has told us that John was the prophet foretold in Isaiah, who would prepare the way of the Lord. He has told us that John baptized Jesus, that Jesus heard a voice from heaven calling him God’s beloved as he rose up from the water. He’s told us that Jesus was then chased into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, tested by Satan, and tended to by angels.

Then John is arrested, and Jesus begins proclaiming a message: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” He calls 4 fishermen to be his disciples. He goes to the synagogue, teaches, and everybody is astounded. He casts out a demon.

And then the 5 men go to Simon and Andrew’s house. There, Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law. They enjoy a meal. And then, as soon as the sun sets and the Sabbath ends, *everybody* in town shows up, looking for Jesus.

All that in 39 verses.

There’s a sense of urgency in Mark’s story. It doesn’t just pull us in and make us want to read more. It reminds us that life is unpredictable. That life can be entirely too short. And insists we make a decision about what Mark has told us.

And if our decision is to believe his story, then he insists we respond accordingly.

But today, he also tells us that Jesus took a break from all that he was doing, and went to an isolated place by himself.

Throughout the Gospels, we hear about Jesus going off alone, sometimes sending the disciples off ahead of him.

Those moments remind us of Jesus’ humanity. Like us, he sometimes needed time alone. Time to rest, time when people were not demanding things of him. Time when he wasn’t being confronted by those who disagreed with him. Time to come up with a new parable, put some thoughts together for a sermon.

These moments also remind us of Jesus’ divinity, that he needed time with the other two parts of the Trinity. For whatever it was they did when nobody was watching, whatever it was that they talked about, that Jesus never shared with others.

I often wonder if Jesus felt conflicted about taking that time away.

In the story we hear today, for instance, we hear the disciples tell him that “everybody” was looking for him.

I’m sure Jesus knew that there were more people to heal. But when Simon and his companions find him, Jesus tells them it’s time to move on. Time to go somewhere else.

Because as wonderful and as necessary as that work he’d done the day before was, Jesus had a message to preach.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Whenever I teach about Mark, as I’m doing now in our Sunday School class, I tell people that Mark’s version of the story of Jesus is the shortest. He often summarizes what happens, like in this passage, rather than dwelling on a particular encounter, telling us about a conversation.

I tell them that when Mark includes a detail –like Jesus going off alone to pray – we shouldn’t overlook it.

Jesus had plenty of opportunities to pray when he wasn’t alone in isolated places. He worshiped at the synagogue, which would have included prayer. By the time he was preaching and teaching in Galilee, faithful Jews had an established pattern of praying at least three times a day, plus saying a prayer of thanks along with each meal. And then there were all the festivals and observances throughout the year, each with its own set of prayers and worship.

And it’s not that Jesus didn’t rest on the Sabbath, either. I’m sure he did. Both for his own sake and to serve as a model for his followers.

Yet Jesus goes off on his own now and then, to find respite from his work and to communicate with God.

As we read Mark, we learn that discipleship is about service. After Jesus raises her up, Simon’s mother-in-law *serves* those gathered in her home, most likely feeding them a meal.

The word Mark uses that’s translated as ‘serve’ is *diakoneó* (dee-ak-on-**eh'**-o). Our word ‘deacon’ finds its root in this word. Mark uses this word earlier in chapter 1, to describe the angels tending to Jesus in the wilderness. He uses it in chapter 15, about the women who were watching as Jesus was crucified, telling us that they ministered to Jesus and the disciples.

And he uses it in chapter 10, where Jesus himself tells us that he came to serve, not to be served.

Which tells us that Jesus understood that healing others was part of how he served. But so was his teaching. His proclamation, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

But those who serve also need time to rest. And they sometimes need time alone to pray. Time alone to listen for God speaking to them. Time alone to allow their souls to be restored so that they can continue to serve.

We are not called only to prayer and study and worship. We’re not called only to serve.

We’re called to both.

Each informs and influences the other.

Jesus both observes the Sabbath *and* takes time alone for prayer and rest. Not just once, but several times. Restored, he returns to serve, fulfilling his calling.

I didn’t plan that this would be the text right before I go off on my own retreat. When I looked at the texts on Monday, I was reminded of Pastor Lenny Duncan saying that coincidences are God’s way of staying anonymous.

In Exodus 20, God insists that we be the kind of people who pause regularly for Sabbath rest.

Jesus going away – not just once, but repeatedly – tells us that we would do well to consider our need for additional time devoted to restoration of our souls.

So this week, I’ll be doing just that. Thanks to the wise counsel and encouragement of several of you, I’ll be taking 4 days of my continuing education time to spend on a private retreat. I’ll spend my days in study, prayer, rest, and – to honor my Epiphany star word – working on listening.

And I encourage you to consider how you can do likewise. To consider how God can bless you by leading you to green pastures or still waters, to restore your soul.

Let us pray: Gracious and holy God, your Son came among us not to be served but to served. Give us faith that leads us to serve you with gladness and teaches us to trust that you provide for our needs. Fill us with your love and guide our ways, this day and always. Amen.