

RESTORING YOUR SOUL

MATTHEW 11:28-30 (early)

I KINGS 19:11-13

MARK 1:29-39

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When I was doing my confirmation, back when I was a teenager in Connecticut, we had to read one of the Gospels straight through. It didn't matter which one, and I got to choose it...one of four, which was it going to be? So I sat down and thumbed through my Bible...which one? Which one? And then I made my decision...it would be the shortest one! Well, I do have a pragmatic side! Therefore, I read the Gospel According to Mark.

The Gospel of Mark is thought to be the earliest Gospel, and it too, like me, has a pragmatic side. It doesn't concern itself at all with the birth of Jesus, as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke do. It doesn't concern itself with Jesus' essential identity with God, as the Gospel of John does. Rather, it dives right in: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Very straight forward and matter-of-fact, Mark starts telling the story of Jesus' ministry right away...story after story after story. In the first chapter alone Jesus is proclaimed, baptized, tempted. He calls his disciples, teaches in the synagogue and heals

people.

The healing stories take place in an almost breathtaking, rapid-fire way. He enters the synagogue at Capernaum to teach and heals a man who has an unclean spirit. From there, he enters Simon Peter's house and heals Peter's mother-in-law. At sundown, many were brought to Jesus who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. So "he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons." All in one day. Whew!

It is no wonder that the Gospel records that on the next morning, before the arising sun could even begin to lighten the sky, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there, we are told, he prayed.

It didn't last long. Simon and his companions hunted for him and found him. Apparently everyone was searching for Jesus. So Jesus began his journey into the neighboring towns and throughout Galilee he proclaimed the message in the synagogues and cast out demons.

I know some of you won't believe this, but I am an introvert and somewhat shy. Truly I am. And because of this, I hone right in on verse 35 in these scriptures. That's the verse that tells us, "In the morning, while it was still very dark, (Jesus) got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." I picture Jesus exhausted by all the demands on him, even as he embraces them all

as part of his calling. I see him tired and spent and in need of renewal before he can start the day and do it all over again, because the needs are so great. So he sneaks away, under cover of darkness, to where there is no one else. It is the only way, it seems, to get centered on his calling and task. He prays until he is interrupted by the people hunting for him. No more time for quiet. Time to get going. No more time to pray. And so begins the whirlwind pace again.

We tend to think of our modern-day schedules as the most crowded and busy schedules of all. No period of history has been more demanding or fast-paced, we believe. But I bet none of ours can match the schedule of Jesus as recorded in Mark. Still, we can learn from this passage much about pacing, and quiet places, and essential work and the love of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of a woman who was studying for the ministry and taking a course in hospital chaplaincy. The course was an intensive one, requiring her presence at the hospital 7 am to 4 pm everyday and being on call every other weekend. This woman loved her work and was seemingly tireless in it. She visited all the patients on her assigned floors faithfully and she heard their fears and their hopes. She knew their families and absorbed their fears and hopes. She comforted those who knew they were dying and consoled families when death arrived. She broke the bad news of auto accidents to parents and she baptized still born infants. Day after day after day until one day she just didn't

show up. She had absorbed so much of everybody else's pain, she just couldn't take it anymore. She was a sponge that could hold no more and was so saturated it wasn't good for anything any more. She left the ministry she never fully began, emptied of herself.

When I read this passage about Jesus, I think of the story of this seminarian. I wonder how Jesus sustained his full-human self. And then verse 35 jumps out at me, and I know. "In the morning, while it was still very dark, (Jesus) got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." He found those quiet places.

Quiet is something on the endangered list these days. It is very hard to find quiet places when you want them. Even in my household, where the television or radio is on for only short periods, the room is not quiet. The clock ticks, the airplane goes over the roof, the freezer in the garage buzzes and the refrigerator fan hums. When the wind is blowing, the clothes line, which is attached to the house, sings, causing my mother to say "Incoming message from outer space."

There are some people who are scared to death of quiet. They put on the television or the radio to fill in the empty places and take the edge off loneliness. The creaks and cracks of the settling house, or the tossing of branches on a windy days set them on edge. In the quiet, there is too much chance that they will have to face themselves and so they set for themselves distractions and hope the time passes quickly.

But in fact, all of us...introverts or extroverts...need those quiet, deserted places and times to sustain ourselves. It is in the quiet places that we find our most significant spiritual insights. There is no noise to cover up what our souls are longing for, or what God's spirit is trying to say to us. No spiritual purpose was ever fulfilled without entering into that quiet space first.

We tend to look for God in dramatic ways. How many times have we heard someone explain their near-brush with death as having been protected by God? Or our insurance companies which insure us from certain events but not from anything they deem "an act of God," which is a euphemism for something catastrophic, like a hurricane, flood or tornado. In our sense of God's greatness, it is easy to assume that every work of God upon our lives comes to us in astonishingly grand ways, designed to put us on our knees in wonder, gratitude or fear. But as Elijah found out as he hid in the wilderness, it isn't in the catastrophic events that we hear God most clearly. When Elijah was instructed to go to the mountain of the Lord, because the Lord was about to go by, there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. It was only in the sheer silence that the voice of the Lord came to Elijah: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

We, too, must not be overcome by the whirlwinds and fires and earthquakes that affect our lives so that we mistake those things for God. Those whirlwinds and fires and earthquakes might take the form of being in an auto accident, or facing a loved-one's cancer diagnosis. It might take the form of the losing a job, or a sudden death, or divorce. We all have earth-shaking things happen in life. But above all this, we must find the quiet place to hear the word of God whispered in our hearts...the words that I imagine Jesus heard in that deserted place. Words like, "I love you. Place your trust in me. I shall give you hope in all things. Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

In the days ahead, make time for those deserted places and invite the word of God into your life. If you do, you will find renewed strength in spirit and greater compassion for our world. The weariness of demand and the dreariness of routine we be lifted and new opportunities in life will open up to you. That's the way the spirit of God works, if we can find the time and space to listen...listen...listen to the word that is whispered to us from the silence. So slip away to that deserted place, if only for fifteen minutes and listen carefully. I bet God has a whole lot he wants to say to each one of us if we 'll just let him and trust in the hope and encouragement of the ways of God.

AMEN