

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Mark 1:29-29, 2/7/2021 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

We are still in the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, and a lot has happened: Jesus getting baptized, being tempted in the desert, calling his first disciples, going into the temple to teach and then performing his first miracle, an exorcism; and now, this morning, healing Simon's mother-in-law before more miracles. Mark has packed a lot into his first chapter, and the chapter is not over yet.

It's not over yet, but Jesus needs a break. Specifically, he needs some alone time to pray. So "in the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."

Imagine the busyness our savior had just experienced: first, Simon's mother-in-law, recovering from a fever. Not as dramatic, perhaps, as the unclean spirit in the temple, but certainly significant as someone personally known and loved by Simon. Right after her healing, "they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door."

The whole city. So many people, a crowd, clamoring for Jesus' attention.

Most of us haven't been in a crowd for nearly a year now. In-person worship was first shut down eleven months ago, along with gyms and restaurants and places where we would congregate with others, so perhaps having the whole city gathering at the door to see Jesus doesn't sound as bad to us right now as it might have a year ago, before we were in pandemic mode. Still, in a time of great busy-ness, Jesus had to get away, alone, to a deserted place, "and there he prayed."

Before the pandemic, I preached a lot about busyness. Some of us might miss the busyness, but for others, the way of being busy has just changed. I'm not at church for evening meetings two or three nights a week anymore, but instead of marking weeks by how meaning evenings I spend away from home, I mark them now by how many Zoom meetings I attend: five last week. And I only work three-quarters time now. I have full-time colleagues who easily have ten Zoom meetings a week.

Whether or not we are busy, being part of a pandemic for almost a year is stressful. Like Jesus, we may long to get away by ourselves to a deserted place to pray. Married couples might not get the time apart that they used to. Gary doesn't go to the gym anymore, for example, so it feels like he's always home. And a couple weeks ago I had to quarantine for a few days so worked from home, and I know it was stressful for him to have me there all.the.time.

Parents seem to have it the worst, having to become homeschoolers when that wasn't what they felt called to do, often while trying to telecommute simultaneously, without having sufficient bandwidth in their home wifi.

But others are alone all the time. I have friends who said they have not felt the touch of another human all these months. Imagine that sort of stress if you are not one of the ones experiencing it right now. Touch was essential to Jesus' healing ministry. In today's reading, he came and took

Simon's feverish mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up. Jesus touched people, in ways that we cannot right now because of this isolating pandemic.

Isolation can make us feel disconsolate, as can having hoards of people pulling on us, seeking our help, like Jesus felt. I imagine vaccine workers feel this kind of stress right now. So many people are seeking a scarce resource. So much need for limited needles. Jesus also must have felt overwhelmed. Yes, Jesus was God, but Jesus was also human. All that need exhausted him.

So in the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

What can you glean from that sentence about prayer?

Some people might latch on to the morning part. Last week I linked on my Facebook page to my friend Heidi Haverkamp's newsletter, "Letters from a Part-time Hermit," about different ways to pray. She wrote about mornings, "There is nothing more holy about the morning, or any hour than any other. (I am amazed how many people seem to think that praying at 5 a.m. is somehow the ideal. Not true.)" Heidi is right! If you aren't a morning person, NO PRESSURE to pray at that time.

But the word "dark" strikes me in that sentence. Darkness can feel especially holy to me. Christmas eve is certainly a holy time, especially the candles in the darkness. Same with the Great Vigil of Easter.

I am also struck by "deserted" place. Other translations translate "deserted" as "solitary," "secluded." "Lonely."

Which translation are you drawn to, and why? I like deserted, because the word "desert" is in there, and I grew up in the desert and find it to be a holy place. But I am also attracted to "lonely," perhaps because a lonely place seems to capture something of what I feel about God: some kind of longing that is hard to describe. A longing like nothing else in my life. A longing I know that can never be truly fulfilled during my earthly life, yet I do not want to move on to the next life yet. I want to stay here, with my loved ones. With all of you.

Luke's Gospel has more about prayer than any of the other Gospels, but prayer is prominent in Mark as well. We see Jesus going off by himself to pray at two other points in Mark: after the feeding of the five thousand in chapter six, and of course, in Gethsemane, right before his arrest.

Each time, Jesus goes off by himself.

In these times, I think most of us want to pray together, not apart. We come together over the livestream, or Zoom, or last week, via Facebook live; but none of these things compare to the physicality of in-person worship. We pray for healing, but we don't feel the hands of our healing prayer ministers on our foreheads. On Ash Wednesday in ten days, I won't get to touch any of your foreheads with my thumb. I cannot express how sad this makes me. I will miss how dirty my thumb becomes.

But I take comfort in knowing that Jesus also felt stress. That he needed time alone to pray. That all of the need pressing in on him when the entire city showed up at Simon's door became overwhelming, and Jesus had to spend a little time in the darkness in prayer before his disciples hunted for him. When they found him said, "Everyone is searching for you." The overwhelming need was still there, but Jesus was strengthened by his time in prayer.

Lent is almost here, and last year we joked that Lent felt like the Lentiest Lent ever. I did not think we would have another Lent like it, but here we almost are. We will start Lent without being able to worship in person, and I hope to God that we will be gathered in person by Easter, but I thought that last year, and look what happened.

Rather than thinking of the Lentiest Lent as a bad thing, we can envision Lent as a holy time to pray, to regroup, to recover from the busy-ness of the world, until we are strengthened to go right back into the mess, like Jesus did. Proclaiming the message. The good news.