

Keeping Still While Keeping Up  
 Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 147:2-6, 10-11  
 Reading from the Gospels: Mark 1:29-39

Reading the Gospel of Mark can be like going to an art museum with my father. You had better be paying attention and have good traction on your shoes, because there's not going to be any standing still. Ask him. He's watching. He'll admit it. No art museum was going to be the highlight of his day.

Perhaps you remember me telling you last week about our *check it off the list* history tour when I was in middle school. Historic Jamestown, check. 5 minutes on the boardwalk at Virginia Beach - Atlantic Ocean, check. Colonial Williamsburg, check. Washington D.C. - Oh, there would be a lot of boxes to check there of varying interest to different members of our family. Would we get them all in? We lingered the longest at the Museum of Natural History and the one with Mr. Rogers sweater and the First Ladies' gowns.

However, when it came time to peruse the masterworks at the National Museum of Art, either my dad was uninterested or they were giving out free beer at the motel, because there was to be no dawdling

in the gallery. "Look, it's a Rembrandt!" "Uh-huh, let's get going." "How about that Monet?" "Drugs, obviously. Come on, keep moving." "Dad, what's Pointillism?" "Ask your mother. Let's go." We rushed by those masterpieces so fast the blur made them all appear Impressionistic. Welcome to the Gospel of Mark. Buckle those seatbelts, we've got to get going.

Mark is the American muscle car of the gospels. It's not as poetic as the others, but it will take you on a straight line to the finish faster than about anything. Mark doesn't have time for birth narratives and field trips with the Messiah as a youth or the luxuriant prose of the Beatitudes. Mark is more of a Sgt. Joe Friday kind of guy. *Just the facts, ma'am*. In the gospel of Matthew, the wilderness temptation of Jesus was a compelling drama, a *High Noon* showdown, encompassing 11 verses.

In Mark, it's 2 verses. He's in. He's tempted. He's out. Zero dialogue. Mark channels Mario Andretti who famously said, "If everything seems under control, you're not going fast enough." Before you get out of chapter 1, John has preached, Jesus has been baptized and tempted; he's traveled to Galilee, recruited four disciples, taught in

a synagogue, expelled demons, removed infirmities, achieved rock star status in Capernaum, gone on a spiritual retreat, organized a preaching tour and cleansed a leper. Yes Ferris, life moves pretty fast.

As with our text last week, we are still by the Galilean seashore in the village of Capernaum. Jesus has just finished teaching in the local synagogue, and so we join with Jesus, Simon, Andrew, James, and John as they walk next door to the home of Simon and Andrew, which just in itself is a significant image. You see, Mark's audience was reading this around the time when Christ's followers were shifting away from the synagogue and forming house churches. Were they pushed out or did they leave? It's hard to say, but Mark's image here would provide a sort of legitimacy to the church, affirming that Jesus was as present in the church as he had been in the synagogue.

Upon entering Simon's house, they find Simon's mother-in-law sick with a fever. Mark tells us that Jesus went to her, took her hand, and "lifted her up." Here, Mark uses the same verb that he uses later to describe the way Jesus "was raised" or "lifted up" from the dead, in both places demonstrating the power of God to give life and to allow no other power to separate us from the presence of Jesus.

Mark continues, "Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." Now, typically, I'd slide past this line, sidestepping the problematic issues of culture, patriarchy, and gender roles. A first reading here fools and frustrates you. "The fever left her and she began to serve them." I mean, you don't heal someone just so they can get you a cup of coffee. However, the language here may imply that something more important is going on here.

"She began to serve them." The Greek here for *serve* is *διακονεω*, which is the verb form of deacon, the historic office of Christian service to which some are ordained, and all are in some way called. It is a calling focused on compassion, witness, and service, focusing particular attention on those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit. One scholar referred to Simon's mother-in-law as the first deacon. *Διακονεω* - It is the same verb Mark uses when describing the care the angels offered to Jesus at the conclusion of his forty days in the wilderness. It is also the same verb Mark uses later when Jesus says, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." And as with Simon's mother-in-law, we serve, not to earn God's favor but in response to the favor God has shown to us in

Jesus Christ. It is reflected in our church's mission statement, "joyfully responding to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with deeds of love and mercy."

"Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." That was quick. But remember, this is Mark. There's no time to sit still; we're burning daylight. We have to get going ... but not quite yet ... because Jesus couldn't get out the door. Mark says the whole city was gathered around the door of Simon's house that evening. Thank God it wasn't Halloween. They never would have had enough Skittles without, you know, a miracle.

As with any crowd there was a mix of agendas and motivations. Some in the crowd, for whom hope had not visited in a long time, had come grasping for any shred of possibility that their suffering could be alleviated. Tormented spirits, pain-riddled bodies, fractured relationships - Could there be relief, some sense of normalcy? Could they even get to the doorway? Craning necks, shuffling, bumping, impatience, a couple of sharp elbows; how long before the shoving starts? Haven't they ever heard of social distancing? There are other

agendas present, too: the suspicious, the curious, and you know some dude is looking for an angle on how to monetize the operation.

Such is the way it is with most crowds. We have a tendency to make everything into a transaction. What can I get out of this? It could be that such thinking influences what happens next, yet in any case, it has been a long, long day for Jesus. Think about it, Jesus could have called it a day after teaching in the synagogue, putting a smackdown on a demon, and lowering his host's fever; he's already deserving of a break, but Mark says the crowd didn't show up until sunset, which means they may have run out of candles before calling it a night. It was a long day.

Yet, Mark says, "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." To be honest, when I read that, I don't know whether to feel inspired, guilty, intimidated, or angry. I mean, come on, Jesus, "it was still very dark?" Very dark? Really? What is that, like four in the morning? I have friends who can do that. A cup of coffee, a single lamp, a Bible, a classic text, maybe a journal." I have friends who can do that. They read that Jesus went out at 4:00am to pray as a spiritual discipline, and they're

thinking, "Hey, that's what I do." Me ... not so much. You wake me up at 4:00 in the morning, hand me a Bible, and tell me to sit still for reading and prayer; I won't make it through the first line of the Lord's Prayer. It'd be like, "Our Father, who art ... (zzzzzzzz). I feel guilty enough about my prayer life, already. But 4:00 in the morning? When I pray, *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord, my soul, to keep*, I mean it. You've got this, God. I'll be with you as soon as I can keep my eyes open. That story about Jesus praying in the garden and the disciples falling asleep? That's me.

Yet maybe ... just maybe, I'm allowing that whole *middle of the night* thing to keep me from hearing what Mark is actually saying here. Perhaps here, Mark is connecting us to the humanity of Jesus. At the end of a long day, it is not just physical exhaustion you're feeling. It can also be emotional, mental, and spiritual exhaustion. I tend to parse exhaustion like this. At the end of a run, I may be tired, hands on hips, heart pounding, sucking in as much air as my lungs can take. However, when a long day has included the intensity of crisis management, deadlines, mental conundrums, keeping the peace, and emotional support, rather than saying I'm tired, I will tend to say, I'm weary.

A hot shower and a nap can cure tiredness, but weariness, that is going to take something more. As much as we pretend it to be otherwise, we are dependent beings. Your existence is a strange, wonderful, and mysterious cocktail of chance and purpose that can be traced back to the time before time, when the mixture of will, love, and intention, whom we call God, set in motion the miracles, substances, events, accidents, coincidences, dreams, pilgrimages, discoveries, mistakes, introductions, and relationships that would make you, you. To lose the thread of that connection to our Creator, our Sustainer, is to be lost.

As I said last week, and as Augustine said centuries before, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." In Acts 17, Luke says, "From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'."



Mark wants us to understand that Jesus, no less than any of us, needed to be intentional in paying attention to the thread of that connection to that essence of will, love, and intention, whom we call God, "our Father, who art in heaven."

Jesus "went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." What do you think Jesus prayed out there in the dark? A student of the scriptures, perhaps he lifted up the words of Ps. 86: "Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you. Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication. In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me."

Perhaps Jesus lifted up the words from Psalm 147: "The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds ... Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. The Lord lifts up the downtrodden ... His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love."

No less than Jesus do we need to pay attention to this connection with the One in whom we live, move, and have our being. Jesus knew our need, because he understood his own. It's why he encouraged us: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." It doesn't have to be at 4:00am, but you must pay attention to that practice of the presence of God, because we just weren't made to run on empty. Coming to understand this about himself, Jesus knew how to encourage us.

Remember, as Mark highlights, life moves pretty fast. Look, even out there in prayer, Jesus couldn't get to amen before the crowds had hunted him down, gnawing at him like the pile of papers sitting on your desk on Monday morning, like the to-do list that looks more like a dissertation. Yet, it is that time for prayer, for scripture, for reflection and meditation that gives Jesus the strength and vision to understand human entreaties always in the light of heaven's purpose. Not my will nor my ego; not their wants or their insecurities, but Thy will alone, O Lord.

Truth is, Jesus could have stayed in Capernaum the rest of his days, each day overscheduled with requests and demands for healing or

recovery. However, Jesus understood that meeting those requests could be meaningful and helpful, but would, most certainly, also be temporary. Those healed would be visited by crisis and illness again.

Out there in prayer in a dark, deserted place, Jesus was fueled with purpose and strength in the presence of the One in whom we live, move, and have our being. While the needs back in Capernaum were worthy, Jesus' larger purpose was not temporary relief, but eternal reconciliation and wholeness. And, as with the disciples, Jesus asks us to join him in this mission of healing the world, yet, all the while, keeping still while keeping up. Read your Bible, say your prayers, listen for the will of God ... and then? Remember the art museum. For there is work to be done. "Come on, we need to keep moving." Amen.