



“Everyone is Searching for You”

a sermon by

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In this season of Lent, Christians most everywhere are challenged to take up the cross of self-examination and contemplation of the spiritual life. It seems like a daunting high and holy task to venture along this inner journey, but truly it is about the most flesh-and-bone exercise we can undertake. Last week, to kick off Lent we spoke of the reality that we are formed out of dust, and are a dusty lot indeed - filled with the sediment of sin but capable of attaining the heavenly goal of salvation because of the capacities of the creator rather than any merit of our own. These weeks before Easter we will turn our attention to a few spiritual disciplines that reveal for us a bit about who we are and a lot about who God is in order to prepare our hearts for a Holy Week pilgrimage to the cross and beyond. Mark does not begin his gospel with the birth narrative, but rather with the proclamation of John the Baptist that he prepares the way for the Son of God, and the inauguration of Jesus' ministry. In the very first chapter of Mark, Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness for 40 days, drafts a few disciples, teaches at the synagogue, and performs an exorcism - and we thought our schedules were full! We pick up our reading in Mark 1:29- immediately after the exorcism - this is the only time this story appears in the gospels. Jesus has gone to stay at the home of one of his disciples.

“As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

Jesus had gained quite the celebrity status by the time we come to this point in the gospel - a mere 39 verses into Mark's telling of his ministry. ‘Celebrity’ would have indeed been the operative term here because no one, not even the disciples really, had much of a sense of who they were dealing with here with this Jesus. Mark's Jesus tries very hard to keep his identity a secret and no one really quite grasped that he was the Son of God. They only knew that he was pretty incredible, and like most of the men and women in any society that amaze us with their words or their appearance, or their actions, or their knowledge, folks wanted to be around him and were baffled by him. The voice Mark gives to the crowds and the disciples reads almost like a screenplay. When he casts out a demon, Mark writes, “They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching - with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.” In the verse before our text today Mark writes “At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.” In the verses following our passage he writes that word spread “so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.” On

two separate occasions, the crowds push in on Jesus and his disciples so tightly or insistently that they cannot even find space or peace enough to eat. In Mark 2 at the Sea of Galilee, quote: "Jesus told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him." His fame spread, in Mark's gospel, like wildfire regardless of his attempts to keep it quiet. People were everywhere and because of his compassion he never refused them. You'll remember how the crowds were so great, the paralytic man's friends cut a hole in the roof of the home where Jesus was teaching just to lower their friend before him to be healed because they couldn't even get in the door. With just these few context clues I think it is safe to characterize this time in Jesus' ministry as 'unrelenting.' He was the guy. The new thing in town. The CEO of awe and wonder. He was the one who was speaking a truth that drew crowds because of the tingling effect his words had in the ears and hearts of the people, he was the one who was casting out demons that had plagued communities and individuals for years, he was the one that could heal just by brushing someone with the hem of his robe, and he was the one in all the gospels, not just in Mark, who ritually, habitually, silently went off by himself to pray.

"In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." In the wilderness, on a mountain, in the home, in the garden, he prayed. It is a dangerous and slippery slope to try to enter imaginatively into the psychology of Christ. Only once does Mark articulate Jesus' exact reasons for praying - when he stood in Gethsemane with his disciples before the hour of his betrayal he left them to pray alone, saying "I am deeply grieved, even to death." But 13 chapters earlier and we are given only context, "And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many ... In the morning while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." And thus begins with a single verse the habit of Christ that becomes the model for our discipleship. The pattern of his pursuit of a quiet space to pray becomes the basis of our Lenten disciplines and the hope for our own daily walk through life because we see that when Jesus was being relentlessly pursued by the crowds he relentlessly withdrew to pursue God in prayer. And in that prayer one might venture to guess that God was relentlessly pursuing him. Only I would similarly guess that this was not a pursuit that bred exhaustion or hunger in Christ, but a quiet fulfillment. Possibly a manna from heaven in the wilderness, because we see that Christ sought prayer, made no apology for prayer, prayed in a way that incited the disciples to ask for instruction on prayer because of their curiosity or perhaps because they sensed that something greater than anything they had ever known or experienced for themselves took place within this man Jesus when he prayed. Mark slips in this line, "Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed," and without answering for us the great question 'why' he builds the conversation about the crowds and the ministries in such a way that the silent, seated Jesus raises an exclamation point high above the healings and the exorcisms and the media blitz and we begin to understand that this prayer is something that we too want to be a part of that we, perhaps like Jesus, need to be a part of to survive. Mark offers an implicit imperative that the space for prayer is something we have got to seek out and fight for and carve away for ourselves be it from the tops of the mountains or in the secret places of deserted spaces in order to be strengthened for the

task at hand. To go forward in our ministry. To proclaim to others and to live into for ourselves the good news that God is with us. When the crowds are pressing in, or when the wilderness expands to meet every horizon, Christ offers his prayer and promises God with us in ours. And all we have to do is seek him.

I wish I could say I was engaged in as sacred a work as Jesus. I wish I could say that all of my own busyness was always on account of carrying out the business of the kingdom. I wish I could stand before you today and say with great conviction that despite whatever it is that presses in on any given day I fight for that holy solitude - and if I fight that I always make myself win. But I can't. And what I realize in this text is that far worse than standing before God with a guilty conscience for inevitably failing in any discipline or effort to invite God into every inch of our lives is not standing before him at all. It is all he asks of us - that we should know him so we can revel in his glory, be humbled by his grace, and strengthened by the certainty of his presence at our side when we fear being crushed by the crowd. Hebrews 4 says "we do not have a high priest (that is Jesus) who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Our text in the gospel of Mark tells us that, believe it or not, Jesus knows what it feels like to have an overloaded day planner. He knows what it is to feel like it will never all get done. He had an entire world to witness to, and we are the ones who feel our tasks are insurmountable. He possessed the power to heal every illness with a touch but could not possibly lay a hand on all the sick and we are overwhelmed without this ability. His fame began to spread, people came to him from every corner. Even when he got up in the morning while it was still very dark and went out to a deserted place and prayed, Mark writes that his companions hunted for him. And when they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." It doesn't ever stop for Jesus. And that is what makes his prayer - the only thing we ever see Jesus do by himself for himself in the scriptures - staggering in its beauty and essential to him and to us.

I wish we could all feel like our days are so full because of all the time we spend healing people, or driving demons back from the innocent, or sharing the truth of God's love. The truth of the matter is, though, that we do in a sense do these very things - each and every day. We have been equipped by faith for discipleship in this world, and by honing our strength and wisdom to live out this call, by wearing on our sleeve the mark of grace we carry on our hearts, we engage in these very same acts as Jesus day in and day out. Though we may not see demons writhe on the ground before us or watch the sick become whole, if we carry the light of Christ before us we become a part of that force that drives away darkness and binds up the brokenhearted. So let us take the occasion of this holy season to reconnect with Christ as both the subject and object of our prayer. Let us look to Jesus as the model for this practice and also as the very One who we seek intimacy with in those quiet spaces. "He went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." And so we pray, too. Pray without ceasing, pray without shame, in boldness, in humility, in faith. Be relentless in making space for prayer and pray in any way you know how. The crowd is demanding. The needs are endless. You are being hunted by this world and everyone is searching for you. It is time to search for God. Amen.