

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 4, 2024 (5th Sunday after Epiphany, Year B)
Mark 1:29-29; Isaiah 40:21-31

There is a word that is ALL OVER the Gospel of Mark – the word “immediately.” It’s a MAJOR THEME of this Gospel. In just the first chapter, it’s in there 11 TIMES! THIS happens, and IMMEDIATELY THIS happens, and IMMEDIATELY THIS happens. It moves BREATHLESSLY from one thing to the next and to the next. IN JESUS, GOD is on the MOVE, and his PLAN is URGENT.

Jesus must have been EXHAUSTED. In our reading, the whole city had gathered around the door, pressing in to see him. He had just BEGUN his ministry, but the DEMANDS on him were ALREADY piling up. He cured many who were sick, cast out demons, and taught constantly.

And his disciples didn't HELP matters. When he left early in the morning to pray, they went out PURSUING him, HUNTING for him. (That WORD choice SAYS something – BEING HUNTED is NOT a POSITIVE!) When they found him, they said, "What are you doing? Everyone is searching for you!"

Does that sound FAMILIAR? Many of US feel that way. We can't stop. We can't take a moment for ourselves. We live in a hi-tech, fast-paced, workaholic world where NO ONE RESTS. We are constantly on the road, running errands, going places. We stuff ourselves with "fast food," overbook our lives with a myriad of things to do, and at the end of the day we are totally exhausted. We live (and die) by the clock. Time is money, they say. We resist QUIET time by keeping our radios, televisions, computers and phones always on. The very thought of being alone, praying, scares us.

How can we find peace when it seems like the whole WORLD is knocking at our door, when everyone and every-THING is SEARCHING for us, wanting a PIECE of us, DEMANDING our time?

Well, we can do what JESUS did—go to a quiet place and pray. "And in the morning," Mark tells us, "a great while before day, Jesus rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed."

Mark doesn't waste any words in his gospel, so NOTICE the TIME— before the sun EVEN CAME UP, it says, BEFORE the world came hunting for him.

C.S. Lewis said, "The moment you WAKE up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day RUSH at you like wild animals. And the first JOB each morning consists in shoving it all back; in listening to that OTHER voice, ... letting that OTHER, LARGER, STRONGER, QUIETER life come flowing in."

Luther was once asked what he planned to that day, and he said, "I have so MUCH to do (today) that I shall spend the FIRST THREE hours in prayer."

You know, there are two ways of handling pressure. An example is a bathysphere, the miniature submarine used to explore the ocean in places so DEEP that the water pressure would CRUSH a conventional submarine like an aluminum can. Bathyspheres compensate for the pressure with steel plating SEVERAL INCHES thick, which keeps the water out, but also makes them heavy and hard to maneuver.

But those bathyspheres are not ALONE down there. When their lights are turned on and they look through the tiny, thick windows, what do they see? Fish! Those fish cope with the extreme pressure in an entirely DIFFERENT way. They don't build thick skins; they remain flexible and free. THEY compensate for the outside pressure by FILLING themselves with fluid, to an EQUAL and OPPOSITE pressure INSIDE themselves.

Christians, likewise, don't have to be hard and thick-skinned to handle the pressure, as long as they FILL themselves with something EQUAL and OPPOSITE – GOD'S POWER FILLING us is EQUAL to the pressure outside.

Jesus knew that. He was always trying to slip away to be by himself. He knew how IMPORTANT prayer is. You see, when we get tired, we pull INTO OURSELVES, we get SELFISH.

It's a defense mechanism, because we don't have anything LEFT to GIVE. Jesus COULDN'T keep going, keep CARING for people, keep EMPTYING himself for others, without RE-FILLING his cup.

And if JESUS, the Word incarnate, the Son of God, NEEDED to pray, then how much MORE do WE.

I saw this on Facebook:

Show picture "Satan never takes a day off"

It says, "Pastor Brown told me he never takes a day off because Satan never takes a day off." And she responds, "Seems to me, Pastor Brown needs to pick a BETTER ROLE model!"

JESUS is our role model! HE TOOK time to be by himself. He rested. And most importantly, JESUS PRAYED.

We need to refill OUR cup. Prayer is more than just ANOTHER thing to do with our time, another thing on our list; it's time WITH God, and IN God. When Jesus went out to a deserted place to pray, that ENABLED him to carry on. He needed the time alone, yes, but more IMPORTANTLY, he needed the time with GOD. He needed the spiritual renewal and refreshment that ONLY GOD can GIVE.

A father took his small son out for lunch one day. They ordered, and when the waiter brought the food, the father said, "Son, let's have a silent prayer." Dad got through praying first and waited for the boy to finish his prayer, but he sat with his head bowed for an unusually long time. When he finally looked up, his father asked him, "What in the world were you praying about all that time?" With the innocence and honesty of a child, he replied, "How do I know? It was a SILENT prayer."

GOD knew what he was praying for. And God knows what WE are praying for. God knows what's in our HEARTS, and God knows our needs even BEFORE WE do. God gives us our daily bread, whatever we need to face EACH day.

In our reading from Isaiah, God gave Israel what THEY needed, and their NEEDS SOUND familiar. When Israel was defeated, uprooted and isolated, the prophet Isaiah spoke: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the one who sits above the circle of the earth and stretches out the heavens before them."

When Israel was weary with all that burdened it, when violence had torn the nation, when it seemed like they couldn't go on, the prophet spoke: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord does not faint or grow weary."

When everyone and every-THING is searching for YOU, wanting a piece of you, and demanding your time, the prophet speaks to YOU too: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord gives POWER to the faint, and STRENGTH to the powerless."

When you can't catch your breath between work, shopping, sports and activities, housecleaning, yard work, preparing meals, and getting ready to do it ALL over again TOMORROW, the prophet speaks: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. You shall run and NOT be weary, you shall walk and NOT faint."

When you grow weak from giving so much of yourself to others, when you cry out, "God, I can't DO this anymore," the prophet speaks: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Those who wait for the Lord shall RENEW their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles."

Don't miss the END our Gospel reading. AFTER he PRAYED, not ONLY was Jesus ready for the morning, he said, "Let us go on to the NEIGHBORING towns, so that I may proclaim the message THERE also; for that is what I came to do." Now THAT'S the Jesus we know and love...BECAUSE he PRAYED.

When the wild animals of your morning come rushing at you, when the pressure gets to be too much, don't get hard and thick-skinned; fill yourself with prayer. Maybe you CAN'T take the first 3 HOURS of your day, like Luther did, but you CAN take SOME time to pray, like JESUS did.

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles." Amen.