

February 4, 2018 – Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
New Members Received – Holy Communion
“While It Was Still Very Dark”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Mark 1:29-39

Most mornings I have the distinct privilege of waking up very early – while it is still very dark. In actuality, I awaken then only because of my two little doggies – Will and Grace who, for some reason, believe THAT is the optimal time to go for a walk and do their business. The routine begins with a bit of resentment. Can they REALLY be up at this hour. Followed by my trying to convince them that it's too early. I've grown somewhat used to the routine – whining, whimpering, eventually scratching and licking while I say repeatedly “not yet, lie down.” Kind of funny. We go through the same routine each day and no matter what I do, they always win. It sure would be nice to sleep in every now and then – just to remember what that was like. Someday – and then I'll likely miss the pestering – maybe not.

I have to admit, sometimes waking up that early offers some unexpected surprises. For example, our walks typically last until sunrise (or at least dawn) and I get the blessing of seeing some of the most beautiful colors as morning light breaks through darkness resulting in views that are absolutely stunning. The other day was one of those as the sky appeared to be on fire in the east and the palm trees to the west in the distance were blessed with this amazing up-lighting before the sun ever broke the horizon. It was incredible!

And then on Wednesday, I got to see the last glimpse of the lunar eclipse just before it set below the horizon and the sun began to do its magic once again. Come to think of it, there really ARE some benefits of these early morning strolls while it's still very dark.

Jesus must have felt the same way. That's not where we find him as today's story opens, but it is where he seems to find place and time to refuel – to be alone with the Source of all that is – his connection to the Divine.

The flow of the story is fast – as is the case in most of Mark's gospel. He moves from the synagogue in Capernaum (you may remember last week's lesson) where he preached and cast out a demon from an unnamed man, and then immediately, Mark continues, enters the home of Simon's mother-in-law. She (also unnamed) was very sick and in bed. Jesus comes to her, took hold of her hand – and immediately the fever left her.

Evidently, this healing set off a wave of interest, because very quickly the whole city was at the doorway seeking their own individual forms of healing. Mark tells us that Jesus healed many of them – ridding them of their diseases and casting out many demons.

All of this must have been utterly overwhelming. So much so that Jesus needed to get away, the scriptures tell us, to a “deserted place,” and there he prayed.

Mark describes the scene as taking place “early in the morning – while it was still very dark.” All the while the crowds were still clamoring. They wanted more. And they knew where to come to get what they needed. Simon obviously frustrated with Jesus thought he was shirking his responsibility. What the heck was he doing - taking time out to pray? There was work to be done. Besides that, this was their ticket to fame. If Jesus would just do what he was supposed to do, soon everyone would believe that truly he was the Savior – the Son of God – the long-awaited Messiah. It would also confirm to him that he and the other disciples made the right choice in their decision to leave their nets, their families, their former lives and follow him.

He comes demanding, “Jesus! What are you doing? Can’t you see? You’re needed. They’re all waiting for you. You’re the only one who can do this. Let’s go!

All this happens while Jesus is praying. Remember, it’s very early in the morning and, “it’s still very dark.”

I keep reiterating that phrase, because it is an important one to Mark. Interesting things happen during these wee hours in Mark’s gospel that I want you to be aware of and to remember as we move through this journey with Jesus. While it is still dark, discoveries are made, new learnings occur, insights are given, direction is received.

The next time we will see this phrase is in the beginning of chapter 15. The occasion will be Jesus’ arrest. The chief priests have conferred, and then decided that this situation was way beyond their pay grade. They hand him over to Pilate very early in the morning – while it’s still very dark. The decision was made. This man was too dangerous even to imprison. The only thing to do was to get rid of him which meant one thing - crucifixion. Realizations and discoveries in the dark are not always correct.

In the next chapter, women arrive at the tomb with spices for anointing. They arrive very early – again, while it was still dark – wondering who would roll the stone away from the tomb for them. Their discovery was completely unexpected. Not only had the stone been removed, but the tomb was empty. Sometimes discoveries are puzzling leaving us bewildered for the time being.

Which was the case for Simon when he found Jesus after searching for him in the dark. Simon and the other disciples were absolutely convinced that Jesus needed to get back to work – that meant healing those right there who desperately needed him. But Jesus knew otherwise.

He knew his work was done there. It was time to move on. He received direction from God and listened to the call to go. Indeed, there WAS work to be done – but it was in a different village. (Pause)

It's that balance in Jesus' life that I invite us all to pay close attention to – especially in rapid pace of our own lives. Like the author of the book of Ecclesiastes states, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven (Eccl 3:1).” There is a time to work – to do – to be active AND a time to be still – to sit – to pray. How did Doug put it last week in the children's story? A time to sit and let our soul catch up. And if our life has that balance we have a much better chance discerning that to which God is calling us next in our lives. (Pause)

It must have been very tempting to Jesus' ego to go back and continue to wow the good folks at Capernaum with his ability to heal and cast out demons. They loved him! But he knew – because God directed him – that his work there was complete. It was now time to move on. He took the time to pause and pray – early in the morning – while it was still very dark – and there he discovered God's will for his life.

Very soon we will enter the season of Lent. There will be all sorts of things to do during that time – devotional reading, classes, spiritual practices, worship services – the list is endless and these are only the churchy things. I invite you to be very careful in discerning what God is calling forth within you. In order to know that, you're going to have to give God some time. You're going to have to spend some time alone – maybe in a deserted place – maybe early in the morning while it is still dark. Who knows, you just may feel the touch of Jesus there, taking your hand, leading you home.

I'll give you a few moments now, in the silence, to pause, to listen, to be still, to let your soul catch up - and perhaps receive a little shot of grace from the God who wants nothing more than to be still with you.

Amen