



“Come Away to a Deserted Place”

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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

A young man approached the foreman of a logging crew and asked for a job. “That depends,” replied the foreman. “Let’s see you fell this tree.”

The young man stepped forward, and skillfully felled a great tree. Impressed, the foreman exclaimed, “You can start Monday.”

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday rolled by — and Thursday afternoon the foreman approached the young man and said, “You can pick up your pay check on the way out today.” Startled, the young man replied, “I thought you paid on Friday.”

“Normally we do,” said the foreman. “But we’re letting you go today because you’ve fallen behind. Our daily felling charts show that you’ve dropped from first place on Monday to last place today.”

“But I’m a hard worker,” the young man objected. “I arrive first, leave last, and even have worked through my coffee breaks!”

The foreman, sensing the young man’s integrity, thought for a minute and then asked, “Have you been sharpening your axe?”

The young man replied, “No sir, I’ve been working too hard to take time for that!”

“I’ve been working too hard to take time for that.” That seems to be a common response from folks. Have you had time to go to church? Have you had time to eat dinner around the table with your family? Have you had time to hug your spouse good morning? Have you had time to take in the pleasure of God’s created day? “I’ve been working too hard to take time for that.”

I understand it all too well. My usual response when someone asks me how I am doing is, “I’m busy.” Many people use the phrase, “I’m too busy” as a badge of honor, as a way to feel important and productive. Yet, I’m beginning to learn that if that is my reply when someone asks how I’m doing, then I am probably not taking care of myself. Sometimes we get so busy that we don’t take time to “sharpen the axe.” And in today’s world, it seems that we are busier than ever, but also less happy than ever. Why is that? Could it be that we have forgotten how to stay sharp? Could it be that we have not listened to the words of Psalm 23 that tells us to lay in green pastures and rest beside the still waters? Could it be that we have missed the part of our gospel lesson today that says that Jesus is our Shepherd and is watching out for us? I don’t know about you, but I often feel like the disciples in today’s scripture reading. I feel like I have been so busy and distracted by doing the work of ministry that I have missed Jesus calling me, calling you, calling us to come away to a deserted place and rest awhile.

At least, that is what I’m taking away from this disjointed reading for today. The lectionary text is rather fragmented and boring. We see that it is a cut-and-paste job that completely takes out the familiar story of Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand in order to focus on the seemingly less spectacular events that bracket it.

The first part of the text highlights the return of the followers from their first unsupervised ministry venture. This was their inauguration into discipleship and doing the miracles and wonders of Jesus. Debie Thomas, a writer and minister says, “Exhilarated and exhausted, [the disciples] have stories to tell Jesus – thrilling stories of healings, exorcisms, and effective evangelistic campaigns. Perhaps there are darker stories in the mix as well – stories of failure and rejection. Hard stories they need to process privately with their Teacher. Whatever the case, Jesus senses that the disciples need a break. They’re tired, overstimulated, underfed, and in significant need of solitude. Jesus, meanwhile, is not in top form himself. He has just lost John the Baptist, his beloved cousin and prophet, the one who baptized him and spent a lifetime in the wilderness preparing his way. Worse, Jesus has lost him to murder, a terrifying reminder that God’s beloveds are not immune to violent, senseless deaths. Maybe Jesus’ own end feels closer. In any case, he’s heartbroken.”

So, Jesus says to them, “Let’s go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile.” Yet, the crowds continue to gather and press in on them. They are pinned by the desperate needs of the people and the desperate depths of the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus’s words ring out again, “Come away with me.” “Come away with me,” is how another translation puts it, and we hear both tenderness and longing in those words. We don’t hear the words, “Go away from me.” Jesus isn’t sending his disciples out again into the towns and into the crowds while they are depleted and deprived. No, Jesus, like the Good Shepherd is calling them in, he is pulling them close. He is saying, “Come to me. Come to me, all of you who are heavy burdened and I will give you rest.” Yes, Jesus wanted to provide rest and recuperation, hope and healing, rescue and rejuvenation for his friends.

But what Jesus said goes against everything expected of us in these post-modern times. The disciples probably didn’t want to take time out of their busy schedules to go on a spiritual retreat. The disciples came back to tell Jesus all that they’d done, all that they’d accomplished, all that they’d taught, all that they’d been doing. They were so busy, busy doing the work of justice and healing and helping. They were felling trees this way and that. But as they came back to Jesus to tell him all that they had done, he didn’t pat them on the back and congratulate them for working so much, for teaching so much, for healing so much, for doing so much. No. There were no words of affirmation were given. Jesus knew that the disciples had come back with dull axes.

I can hear the disciples now. “But Jesus, aren’t we called to be non-stop agents of transformation and liberation? Aren’t we called to preach good news to the poor, freedom to those in captivity, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor to all? Aren’t we supposed to be on the move? Won’t we miss something if we aren’t everywhere? Won’t we miss that healing or that exorcism or that march or that rally or that mission project or that person on the street or that ministry opportunity?”

One pastor said this text reminded him of a scene from a book called *God and Human Freedom*. In that book, a pastor in Evanston, IL, remembers having Howard Thurman as a guest; and as he welcomed Dr. Thurman into his office, he shared with him all of the things he was doing in his ministry and all of the new programs the church was starting to reach out into the community. And after he shared all that he was doing, Dr. Thurman finally looked in his direction and asked,

“And who are you?” And at that moment the pastor said he was reminded that he was legion, legion of doing, doing, doing, doing, but never stopping to be. Never stopping to simply be.

And when we stop, we might be able to notice those in between places of our lives. Those connecting times that lead us from one big experience to the next. Those liminal moments that we most often miss because we are too busy and because our axes are dull. That is what we get in our lectionary text for today. We get the connecting sentences and passages in the Gospels that fall between the major stories, those little transition verses which often bracket the familiar and well-known events of Jesus’ life. Passages like Luke 5:16: “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” Or Mark 11:12: “The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.” Or Matthew 8:24: “Jesus was sleeping.” Or Mark 7:24: “He didn't want anyone to know which house he was staying in.” Or John 11:35: “Jesus wept.”

In these short verses, these in between verses, we catch glimpses of Jesus’ human life, his in between times, the times where he had to catch up to his soul and slow down. It is that life we can relate to the most. We understand his need to withdraw, his desire for solitary prayer, his physical hunger, his sleepiness, his inclination to hide. We understand well that he couldn’t stay busy all the time without finding moments of rest and seclusion.

We also find a Jesus who, despite needing a time of rejuvenation, had the weight of the world upon his shoulders. He literally had entire crowds pressing at him, chasing him, not giving him one moment’s peace. But did Jesus run? Did he get frustrated when the people anticipated his every move? Did he see the crowd on the other side of the lake and decide to turn the boat around and sail away? No. As Mark puts it, “Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So, he began to teach them many things.”

And then the second part of today’s lectionary text is basically a repeat of the first escape by boat. After the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, Jesus once again asks the disciples to get back in the boat and sail away. Rest and relaxation, take two. But once again, the crowds anticipated Jesus’ plan, and as soon as the boat landed at Gennesaret, the crowds went wild, pushing and shoving to get close to Jesus. They carried their sick to him on mats. In every village and city Jesus visited, multitudes of people lined the streets. They pressed against him. They pled to simply touch the fringe of his robe and receive healing. The Jesus who needed to rest and rejuvenate, the Jesus who was hungry and tired and weak and alone, this Jesus once again responded with compassion. The text said, “All who touched him were healed.”

But, I hate to break this to you, you aren’t Jesus. And neither am I. We aren’t strong enough to carry the ongoing tension between being compassionate and having good self-care. Jesus lived with this tension and knew how to live on this border of healing and hiding. Jesus traveled the borders of life between Jew and Gentile lands, between life and death, between demons and angels, between hurriedness and wholeness. Jesus was constantly seeking solitude for prayer and times for retreat when he and his disciples needed a break. But, he never allowed his weariness to stop the wind of the spirit. He never allowed his fatigue to overcome his faith. He never allowed his exhaustion to overwhelm his compassion. But we aren’t Jesus, and unlike us, Jesus

realized that he was the last stop for those aching, desperate crowds – those sheep without a shepherd. Unlike us, his compassion was indeed great.

Douglas John Hall, minister and professor, writes that the meaning of compassion here needs to be understood as more than mere pity. Pity, he suggests, “is something you can manage from afar.” When we see commercials to give a couple of dollars to starving children in another country, we can have pity on them. When we see someone of a different race or faith or ethnicity move in across the street, and we simply give a passing wave at them, that is not compassion. According to Hall, “You do not have compassion, really, unless you suffer with those to whom you refer. The precondition for compassion is unconditional solidarity with the ones for whom you feel it.” So, Jesus ministers to the crowds. He heals the sick. He exorcises the possessed. He teaches the seekers. He loves the outcasts. Jesus, in the major story not told today, feeds the thousands of people, even though his strength was gone and he was tired and hungry. He needed to get away, he needed rest. But now wasn’t the time. There were needs that need attending to.

And though we aren’t Jesus we are his followers and we need to act with compassion. Because to act with compassion is to be involved in the lives of those who hunger and thirst and hurt and are outcast and are on the outside. When we come away with Jesus our Shepherd, when we rest awhile in prayer and in solitude with the one who created and loves us, we begin to understand the compassion Jesus has for the world. And Jesus’ compassion is so all encompassing because Jesus knows what it feels like to be human. All throughout Mark Jesus is tired, Jesus is frustrated, Jesus is drained, Jesus is sad, Jesus is concerned, Jesus is hurting. We get a Jesus in Mark who goes to cross with all of our feelings, all of our fears, all of our faults, all of our failures. We see a Jesus who knows what it is like to be us. And since Jesus goes to the cross as one of us, knowing who we are, we need to really listen to what Jesus is asking us to do. “Come away to a deserted place and rest awhile.”

That’s our invitation today, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.” This is not just an invitation to take an afternoon off or go on vacation – though those are important – this is an invitation, according to David Lose, “to loosen our shackles and climb out of the cages we’ve constructed from a culturally-fed belief that more is the ticket to happiness and that work is the ticket to more.” If we take seriously that Jesus is our Shepherd, taking care of us like sheep, then we should remember Psalm 23. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” We need to focus on the second half of this phrase, “I shall not want.” Because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Because Jesus knows what I’ve been through, I shall not worry. Because I trust in God, I shall not give in to constant need to do, and provide, and work, and stress, and fear. Because God will take care of me, I shall get off of the exhausting treadmill of accumulation and effort and exertion so that I can rest and rejoice in the abundance of life.

But I know that’s hard to do. As Lose says, “No wonder the Psalmist says quite honestly that the Lord didn’t simply invite rest but rather confesses that the Lord ‘makes me lie down in green pastures.’ We are a people, we are a church, I am a pastor, that desperately needs rest. And maybe, like Jesus, all we can provide is the edge of our cloak. And that’s ok. Because as we rest, we indeed sharpen our axes so we can do the work, the hard work, of compassion and justice. Church, Jesus is commanding us today, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.”