

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**The Rev. Robert M. Alexander**  
**Mark 1: 29-39**  
**“A Deserted Place”**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany**  
**February 8, 2015**

How many of us have spent time recently in “a deserted place?” It is hard to find such a place considering how connected we are to the world around us. In addition, our schedules are so full and there are so many demands on our time that we might not even notice it if we were in such a place. We certainly don’t have time to seek it out.

Maybe you can relate to parts of this full day in someone’s life.

Get up and empty the dishwasher  
Make the lunches for the day  
Plan your wardrobe  
Eat breakfast and post it on Facebook/Instagram  
Make your grocery list  
Read the headlines in the paper  
Tweet about the shocking front page story  
Head to work  
Pick up your prescription at the drug store  
Answer emails, phone calls, and text messages  
Pick up sick child/grandchild at school  
Tweet about the virus going around  
Update your status on Facebook/Instagram  
Have a working lunch  
Take your child to practice or attend your own practice  
Prepare for a test or a meeting or (You fill in the blank)  
Help someone with homework  
Work on a school or work project  
Update status on Facebook/Instagram  
Make three more connections on LinkedIn  
Shop for groceries and fill the grocery bag for Scouting for Food.  
Make cookies for the blood drive  
Schedule seven meetings and phone calls for the next day  
One last post on Facebook/Instagram before bed  
Finally – Sleep.

I am reminded of an episode of the 70’s sitcom Happy Days when the Fonz is sleeping outside on a camping trip. While he is trying to enjoy some peace and quiet the animals of the forest begin their nocturnal calls. Crickets chirping, birds whistling and calling, owls hooting, chipmunks chattering...the sound, one added on top of another, builds and builds and builds until finally The Fonz sits up and yells – “COOL IT!” Silence! He smiles and lays back down to sleep. Wouldn’t we all like to have that ability? To be able to quiet all the distractions of our lives with a word like “COOL IT!” so that we could find some peace and quiet.

In our text this morning from Mark, we read of a full and demanding day in the life of Jesus. It began in the preceding passage which Lib read last week. He spent that particular Sabbath day teaching in the synagogue when he was interrupted by a man with an unclean spirit. After rebuking the spirit and cleansing the man of it Jesus's popularity instantly spread. Almost as if the disciples were protecting him from the crowds they rushed Jesus to Peter and Andrew's house. There they found Peter's mother-in-law sick and in bed with a fever. Jesus, in resurrection language, took her by the hand and raised her up. Mark tells us that the fever left her and she began to serve them. This nameless woman responded to the healing power of Jesus with humility and gratitude – a great example for any of us.

In the evening, the crowds continued to come to Peter's house. Mark tells us that "the whole city" gathered at his door. Jesus stayed up, long into the evening I suppose, to heal the sick and to set people free from the demons and unclean spirits to which many were enslaved.

Now, many of us might want to sleep in after a day like that. But we find Jesus up before the sun, in a deserted place where he prayed. Why was he there? We could wonder about the reasons. Maybe he was setting an example for his followers. Maybe he was getting some time alone before joining the masses again. Maybe he was communing with his Heavenly Father in order to gain strength and direction for the day ahead. The gospels don't tell us in this particular instance why he prayed or what he prayed. They tell us when and where. There are many other occasions when Jesus prayed. The gospels tell us that he often withdrew to quiet and solitary places.

After reading about the busy day that Mark described in the life of Jesus I was reminded of a quote that is attributed to the reformer Martin Luther. It goes like this "If I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the Devil gets the victory through the day...I have so much business, I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer." (Martin Luther)

I think MC Hammer picked up on that idea in the 90's when he sang "PRAY! PRAY! You've got to pray just to make it today!"

In his book Too Busy Not to Pray, Bill Hybels wrote that prayer is an unnatural activity. What he means by this is that human pride keeps us from depending on anyone else. We always want to say we have done it ourselves. I think I see where he is coming from. I have heard on many occasions throughout life that "self is the only certain reliance." Prayer suggests otherwise. Prayer invites us into a humble posture before the creator of heaven and earth. In prayer we are invited to trust in God's goodness, in God's love, and in God's purpose for us. In prayer we remember to submit our will to the will of God and trust God for the strength to carry it out.

Mark tells us that Jesus went to this dark and deserted place of his own volition. In one sense I think this is an encouragement to us to seek out space in the midst of our crazy-busy lives to commune with God. Some scholars, however, see this almost as a foreshadowing of trouble to come. The mention of darkness and the mention of deserted space are both reminders of the wilderness temptations that Jesus had endured and possibly a peek at the difficult days to come – especially the dark night in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion. Sometimes we find ourselves in dark and deserted places and we haven't chosen to be there. We are scared and we feel alone and we long for light and peace and community and love but we feel empty. There are times in the busyness of life when we need to steal away to be only with God, but there are other times of darkness and loneliness when we search and cannot seem to find God at all.

Our Call to Worship this morning is from Isaiah 40 and in it we hear the words of the prophet to the exiles returning from Babylon. The exiles were in a place like that. They felt like they had lost everything. They were far from home and therefore far from God. The temple had been destroyed and they were losing their identity. The prophet reminded them that they were not alone and that God was still there with them to raise them up to new life. “The Lord is the everlasting God. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.”

And this waiting – I believe – is prayer. When we sit in the darkness – and trust and seek and wait upon God we find that eventually we gain a new clarity about our lives and about God’s presence in, with, and around us. While this is so much easier with the support of community sometimes we still find ourselves alone.

Perhaps you have heard the legend of the Cherokee Youth’s Rite of Passage? His father took him into the forest, blindfolded him and left him alone. He was required to sit on a stump the whole night and not remove the blindfold until he felt the warm rays of the morning sun hit him. He was not supposed to cry out for help to anyone. Once he survived the night, he would be a MAN. He couldn’t tell any of the other boys of his experience, because each one had to come into manhood on his own.

The boy, naturally, was terrified. He could hear all kinds of noises in the forest around him. He imagined the wild beasts all around him watching and considering him for their next meal. Maybe even some human might do him harm. The wind blew the grass and the earth. It seemed to shake the little stump where he sat. But he sat on, stoically, never removing the blindfold. It was the only way he could become a man!

Finally, after a horrific night the sun appeared and he removed his blindfold. It was then that he discovered that his father was sitting on the stump next to him. He had been at watch the entire night, protecting his son from harm.

The legend continues by saying that we, too, are never alone. Even when we don’t know it, God is watching over us, sitting on the stump beside us. When trouble comes, all we have to do is reach out and God is there. (author unknown)

This deserted place – this place of prayer – is **a place of remembrance**. It is a place to remember – even in the fear of that dark night - that God is with us. And this God is the everlasting God who promises to remain with us and to strengthen us through the darkest of nights. Perhaps for Jesus it was a place to remember the words spoken to him at his baptism – “you are my beloved and with you I am well pleased.”

The deserted place is also **a place of reflection**. It is a place to consider the day that has past. For Jesus, perhaps it was a place to think about all those who had come to him for help the day before. Perhaps it was a place to reflect again on his mission and to find the strength to press on, knowing that he had to move on to proclaim the good news in other towns. Despite the pressure from Peter and the other disciples to return to the crowds around Peter’s house, Jesus’ time in prayer clarified the greater need for the day. How often might we benefit from a clearer focus about the priorities of our day? Without such clarity we bend to every want, need and distraction that comes our way and we quickly lose our focus.

Taking time in prayer to reflect over our day might reveal a clearer direction for our lives that would change our course entirely.

Finally, the deserted place is **a place of communion**. It is a place to sit and commune with the God of all creation. It is a place to rest in the shadow of the Almighty as Psalm 91 suggests. It is a place where, as St. Augustine taught, our restless hearts find their rest in God.

Richard Foster in the opening to his book on Prayer wrote that “The heart of God is an open wound of Love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with much-ness and many-ness. He longs for our presence....And he is inviting you – and me – to come home, to come home where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in.”<sup>i</sup> (Foster, p. 1) Entering into that space is communion with God.

One of the points of the Scout Law is that **A Scout is Reverent**. Reverence is about showing honor, awe, and respect. We can show reverence to one another and to all of life and we can show reverence to God. When we commune with God in that deserted place – removed from the distractions of life – where the cell phone is off – where the tablet is silenced – where the wish list is set aside - where the day’s agenda hasn’t started to pester us – where people are not interrupting us - **then** we can truly revere the Everlasting God – the creator of the ends of the earth.

Of course, we may be scared of what we will find there in such a place. Certainly God will challenge us and will ask us to go beyond where we think we can go. But God will also remind us of God’s greatness and of the greatness of God’s mission for us and for the church. God will remind us of the wonder of being raised up on wings as eagles – of running and not growing weary – of walking and not growing faint. And it is this walking that makes up the majority of our lives as we follow Jesus Christ and become his disciples. And as we do – we learn from him – about healing – about setting people free from that which binds them – about proclaiming Good News – and yes – about praying.

So friends, let us walk with Jesus into that dark and deserted place and trust him not to lead us astray. Let us give ourselves anew to times of deep/sustained prayer. These times of deeper prayer for remembrance, for reflection, and for communion will clarify our purpose in this world and prepare us to be the faithful disciples that we were created to be.

So take time today, and tomorrow, and this week to find that deserted place and **Be Still**.

**To God be the Glory! Amen.**

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Foster, Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home. Harper: San Francisco. 1992. P. 1