



LAKESWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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February 6, 2012

SO, YOU'VE GOT TO PRAY FIRST?
Mark 1:29-39

As I stated last week, this is the time of year when the lectionary begins to wind us through the early years of Jesus' ministry and mission, so that when we get to Lent we know what his intent has been and we're ready to see just how passionate he is about US picking up the mantle of that mission and ministry.

So in the first 28 verses of Mark's gospel, we see Jesus baptized by John the baptizer and filled with the Holy Spirit. We see the calling of his first disciples, Simon and Andrew, and James and John. Then they are off to Capernaum and their first Sabbath there, Jesus went to the synagogue and taught. Mark says the elders were "astounded at his teaching because he taught as one with authority and not as their scribes." (Mark 1:21-22) There, in the synagogue, Jesus meets a man with an unclean spirit who challenged his authority. He cast the spirit out of the man, leaving the elders and scribes in utter amazement.

And then, the events we encounter today. They take a short walk from the synagogue to Simon's house. Mark says James and John were with him. When they got there, they found Simon's mother-in-law sick in bed with a fever. According to Mark, "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." (Mark 1:31)

News spread fast. Before the sun went down there were hordes of infirmed and demon-possessed people standing outside hoping to be healed. Mark says simply, "the whole city was gathered around the door." (Mark 1:33)

The next morning, there would be others. By the time Jesus went to bed, he must have been exhausted. You couldn't blame him for wanting to sleep in the next day or taking the day off. But, no, according to Mark, "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." (Mark 1:35)

Well, if Jesus first looked to God for strength and direction and peace in the midst of all those clamoring voices ... shouldn't WE?



A long-standing practice in the Presbyterian Church is to pray before every meeting. Every Session meeting begins and ends with a prayer. So does every congregational meeting, just like we'll be doing today. Every meeting at church should begin and end with prayer, for that matter. Before we get down to business ... we PRAY.

To be honest, that used to frustrate me. Especially in a busy church like LPC, there's SO MUCH to DO. In years past, at other churches, I'd come to a Session meeting and there'd be so many items on the agenda I didn't see how we were going to get out before midnight. Still, we called the meeting to order, and we prayed. We prayed that God would be with us and that we'd have the mind of Christ to be led by the Spirit, so that everything we said and did would be in accordance with God's will for our church and all concerned.

Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek Community Church ... one of the largest churches in the country ... says, "The busier you are, the MORE you need to pray." I guess Hybels is right, but really, if it was good enough for Jesus ... it should be the same for US.



Now, it's interesting to note that Jesus didn't just get up early in the morning and kneel by the side of his bed. Mark says, "He went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." When Mark

says he went out to a deserted place ... obviously to spend time alone with God in prayer ... where, exactly, did Jesus go?

Many scholars speculate that since Jesus is in Capernaum, near the traditional site of the Beatitudes, where Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the place he probably went to is Mount Eremos ... on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, where there are rolling hills and running water and lush vegetation. This "deserted place" where Jesus went, in the original Greek, was his EREMON ... recognize the name? Mount Eremos. Many believe it was here that Jesus often came to pray. And those same scholars think this was the place where Jesus just loved to chill.

Well, whether or not this is the place really isn't the point. The point IS Jesus went somewhere to get away from the crowds and the pressures and the expectations to perform another one of his miracles.

Do you see my point? If Jesus needed a quiet place to talk with God and listen for the voice of God's Spirit giving him comfort and strength and direction ... don't WE?



You're going to be hearing a lot about my Sabbatical in the next couple of months. In fact, our Lenten series, both through the Sundays of Lent and for our Wednesday night programs, will have the theme: "Sabbatical Connections." We want YOU to experience "Sabbath" along with ME...

But more about that later today at our Annual Meeting and in the weeks to come. What I want to mention to you now, is that EREMON ... that "deserted place" where I find I can talk with God and listen for the voice of God's Spirit giving ME comfort and strength and direction.

Mondays are my Sabbath. Where I love to be on my Sabbath is ... can you guess? At the beach! Walking along the beach, leisurely looking for sharks teeth, I do a lot of thinking, praying, contemplating, questioning, and yes, listening for the voice of the Spirit speaking to my heart. Before I leave to go on my Sabbatical in April, I'll be inviting you to come to my EREMON with me to walk and talk and hopefully encounter God is some sort of the same way I do when I am there.

Where is your EREMON ... your "deserted place?"



A dozen years ago I preached a sermon in Akron about Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane. One of the stained glass windows in the church is a replica of Heinrich Hofmann's painting of that event (1890), and it shows Jesus kneeling, in agony, at a rock with his face turned toward heaven. I mentioned that we needed a rock, in the metaphorical sense, where we might pray. Mary, a member of the church, took the sermon to heart and decided that she needed a rock in her back yard ... she took the sermon literally. She contacted a local stone supplier and had them deliver a four-ton granite rock and place right in the middle of her back yard.

I went for a visit to see Mary's rock and as I stood there in her backyard, I knew I was standing on holy ground, made sacred by the prayerful devotion of this very special woman. The rock was her EREMON ... the one place she knew she could go to get away from the commotion of the world and be refreshed and renewed in the Spirit.

So ... What about YOU? Do you have an EREMON ... a special place ... a "deserted place" you like to go to be apart with God? If not, think about creating one. It doesn't have to be a rock or even the beach. Where do you find rest? Where is that special place you can go to get away from it all and concentrate on your relationship with God? For James Taylor it's "Up On The Roof." For YOU it can be as simple as a favorite chair or a tree in the back yard.

And it doesn't have to remain the same all the time. When I'm not at the beach my little EREMON is just sitting at the kitchen table in the morning with my computer and newspaper, looking out into the back yard. It's not all that special. It's just that I feel comfortable writing sermons there, saying a prayer for you when YOU need it ... a prayer for me when I need it. It's a place to go before our busy day starts or where we can go to retreat from the pressures of every day life and be apart ... alone with God.



Jesus left the home of Simon and his family early in the morning while it was still dark and went to his EREMON to pray. It wasn't long before Simon and the others found him. Mark says, "Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.'" (Mark 1:36-37)

One commentary points out that the word "hunted" has an almost hostile ring to it ... like hunting for ducks or quail or going deer hunting. If you look closely, you'll find that it's often the case that, in Mark's gospel, when people hunt for Jesus, their intent is NOT to sit at his feet, but to STAND in his way.

No, when Simon and the others hunted for Jesus, it was not to join him in his EREMON for prayer ... it was to scold him for NOT being in his PLACE: "Where have you been?" they wanted to know. "Everyone is searching for you!"

But, remember, Jesus was NOT driven by the expectations of others ... he was entirely motivated by his relationship with GOD.

✚ Yes, there were a lot of people waiting outside Simon's home hoping to be healed.

✚ Yes, there were a lot of people expecting Jesus to give them more words of wisdom, like when he taught in the synagogue last Sabbath.

✚ And yes, there were a lot of people hoping he was the long-awaited Messiah, who would restore Israel to her rightful place of prominence as the people of God.

All this, and yet ... instead of going back to Capernaum, Jesus said,

"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." (Mark 1:38-39)

HOW was Jesus able to stay so FOCUSED?

I can tell you in a word: PRAYER.



A woman battling the chaos of cancer treatment wrote of her experience in this way:

"Suddenly I found myself swept up in the storm of the vast waves of the medical ocean. Up and down. Tossed and blown. Surgery now. Chemotherapy later. Try this. No, try this. That's better. Or is it? CT Scan doesn't look good. Try this. IVs. Lab work. More tests. More needles. More LIFE? Maybe. X-rays. More chemo. Experimental drugs. Nausea. No. NO MORE.

"... Early on in my illness a friend gave me a book that has given me hope. It's entitled, The Triumphal Patient, by Greg Anderson. I rehearse the "Triumphant Patient's Creed" every day and share it with others. It goes:

"Hope reigns in my life today. My illness does not rule me. Daily I seek to acknowledge the physical, be positive in the mental, transcend the emotional, and anchor in the spiritual, knowing that God's Presence is my goal. Thank you, Lord, for today's blessings."

(The Triumphal Patient, by Greg Anderson, Wichita Falls Medicine, Nov-Dec., 1996, pp. 25-26)

Here's what I hope you'll take home with you today:

We live in a hectic world where any number of voices are crying out for our time and attention. I think about that mother in California who was in the news a few years ago with the fourteen babies all whining, "Mama!" at the same time. HOW are YOU going to keep your sanity and stay in touch with God when the world around you is in such a mess?

Well, before you get consumed by the craziness of it all, find yourself a little EREMON. Let it become for you a sanctuary in which you, too, are anchored in the spiritual and attuned to God's will for your life.

FACE IT: With all that's going on ... You've Got To Pray First!

Amen and Amen.