

Epiphany 5 Year B
Mark 1:29-39
February 2, 2018
St. George's Episcopal Church
Fr. Chris

Alone with God

“He got up and went to a deserted place...”

A Deserted Place. When you go camping, as the new owner of an off-road teardrop trailer, you would call this boon-docking, that is, camping “off-grid.” When you do this, there is no “shore power” electricity and there is no water hook up. No cable TV. You need to bring with you what you need. We tried this once after I picked up my trailer, and I was surprised how it was able to work and have lights and music and TV without ever being plugged in. This is because it uses very energy efficient lights and electronics, which sip power carefully each hour, and because it has batteries and solar power from which to source the energy. But it is possible to drain the batteries if you are not careful. Batteries must be recharged regularly before they are drained completely. There is a spiritual lesson in there for all of us.

Even Jesus knew that he was running on empty and he needed some spiritual refreshment and recharging. And so, after dark, he sought out a deserted place. Why a deserted place do you think?

For one thing, there would be few distractions. There would not be the smell of delicious food cooking on the fire to tempt him. There would be no lights to ponder or walk toward. There would be no conversations to be overheard. In our own time there would be no smart phones, no computers, tablets, or TV to occupy us and distract us and fill up our quiet time, keeping us from that fearsome gift of facing time alone with nothing “to do.” If you don’t believe me, the next time you are in a waiting room, a line in the store, or anywhere else where you are waiting with nothing much to do, notice how many people are focused on fiddling with their smart phones, even when a TV may be blaring in the waiting room-that usually no one is watching. Almost everyone is preoccupied with their electronic gadgets-including me!

Yet the Deserted Place offers something special: As the Psalmist wrote, “For God alone my soul in silence waits.” [Psalm 62: 1, 5]

Why a deserted place? There would be no one there to engage him in a conversation, save God alone. I know I am often tempted to delay and procrastinate in what work I am called on to do, and not only that, but work I must do by a deadline hanging over my head. It is easy to take a break and converse with friends and co-workers. It is very easy to allow yourself to become distracted by “idle conversation,” though I am not sure such conversation is always a bad thing. Being alone, away from others helps you to focus or refocus your thoughts, actions, and life. Sometimes the chaos of busyness and the demands upon our attention, totally defuse and dilute what we have set out to do.

Being truly alone in silence allows us to listen for the still small voice of God over the cacaphony of our own musings, thoughts and the ever-present sound of our own voice yakking away. Imagine how Jesus must have been feeling when he walked off in the dark of night to that deserted place. Sometimes you just need to get away and retreat from all the busyness before you become exhausted and worn out by it. Sometimes the silence surrounds and soothes you.

A Deserted Place. There would be no one there seeking to ask him to do something for them. When I arrive at work on Monday morning, the first thing I do is prepare a “to-do list” so that I can prioritize what I need to do. Once I open my emails, that list may change from being simple and focused to being overwhelmed by requests for my attention and action. This is very stressful, and you begin to feel as though you and your life are out of control. I hate it. I don’t feel as though I am important but rather as though I am the last place to turn to and dump something on when you don’t want to do it: give it to Chris!

And then I interact with those who I am supposed to be a healer to, usually through many phone calls or texts early on Monday-sometimes on my way into work or even before, requesting my help or action...will I do this or that for them today, or at least this week? Looking at my calendar, it is difficult to find an open slot to accommodate them, and this is only Monday morning before I even get started. I am already yearning for a deserted quiet place where I can be still.

Many of us experience the same thing. Imagine how Jesus felt. He came to teach, and He would get hoards of people with serious lifelong problems, seeking His healing powers. As He used those powers, He must have felt the energy draining from Him as He focused intensely on each soul He cared for. [For evidence affirming this observation, see Mark 5:27-30... “She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”]

It must have felt good to escape the demands of the crowds for just a few hours, but imagine how Jesus felt when the Gospel describes how his time alone ended that night as the agenda of his followers thrust was upon him once again: “Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’” Indeed, this was no headline for God. There will be no end to God’s work: the poor and the sick you will always have with you.

He would be able to focus and re-center himself. Without all the distractions of the world, without all the demands, in the quiet solitude, alone with God, Jesus could not only recharge his batteries, but he could re-center and refocus himself as a part of that. What does that mean? It means that Jesus could rediscover and recommit to His central purpose and the focus of His earthly visit. It means that when He leaves the solitude of being alone with God, He will be refreshed for his journey and will be better able to stay on task and not have His ministry diluted by other tempting demands.

In the Deserted Place He could rest. Ministry is both exciting, fulfilling and exhausting work. It may be fun. It may make you happy, but it can tire you out. Ministry can also be emotional and

heart rending. Imagine seeing people come to you who have suffered for many years, who want some relief, some form of healing. To see this would leave your heart breaking, knowing that you could only heal a few of your children who needed this comfort. And healing was only a part of what God came to do. It did demonstrate the power of God in Jesus, which might give some who witnessed these miracles pause to listen to what He had to say to them. On the other hand, it was a way to show the compassion of God, that God is not distant, but knows our sufferings and God will answer our prayers, sometimes as we desire, and sometimes better than we could desire and pray for.

In the Deserted Place Jesus could find spiritual refreshment, that is, He could find the strength to continue on in the ministry God wished to accomplish while visiting the people of Israel. He had, in the words of the poet Robert Frost, ‘miles to go before I sleep.’”

(Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening)

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening by Robert Frost (26 March 1874 – 29 January 1963)

So what is Spiritual Refreshment? It is a chance to be alone with yourself and God, and in a space in which you bring nothing to the agenda, and in which you sit quietly in the silence surrounding you and take a few deep breaths. It means prayer, meditation and contemplation, fancy technical terms for things all of us know how to do if we want to. It means listening to something nurturing. It means turning off the noise of the world for a set period of time. The noise will always be there. You won’t. Let go and let God. Let the Peace of Christ which passes all understanding be with you, in your heart, your body your mind and your soul.

I am reminded of the passage in Matthew’s Gospel that has always been a comfort to me:
"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

When you are feeling weary from stress and over-work... when the burdens of your life seem to heavy to bear... when the daily news cycle becomes toxic and overbearing, then you are in a

come to Jesus moment. Come to Jesus and find rest for your soul. Seek out a deserted place and
Come to Jesus. There you will find rest and refreshment that will sustain you and not disappoint,

AMEN