

“Waiting for the Lord”

Date; February 8, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-31

Occasion: Epiphany 5, Year A

Themes: Prayer, silence, waiting

The story is told of a little boy and his father. They were walking along a road when they came to a large stone. The boy looked at the stone and thought about it a little. Then he asked his father, “Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move that rock?”

The father thought for a moment and said, “I think if you use all your strength, you can do it.” That was all the boy needed. He ran over to the rock and began to push on it. He pushed and he pushed, so hard did he try that little beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. But the rock didn’t move – not an inch, not even half an inch.

After a while, the little boy sat down on the ground. His face had fallen. His whole body seemed to be just a lump there on the earth. “You were wrong,” he told his Dad. “I can’t do it.”

His father walked over to him, knelt beside him, and put his arm around the boy’s shoulder. “You can do it,” he said. “You just didn’t use all your strength. You didn’t ask me to help.”

There’s a powerful lesson in that story. The world in which we live tells us that it’s all up to us. It tells us that we have to be strong and independent. It tells us we can’t and we shouldn’t count on anyone or anything else. And yet, what faith tells us, and what Jews and Christians have known for years, is that we have a ready resource in God, a tremendous strength for those who ask.

The sermon this morning is about prayer. Jesus serves as a role model for a life of prayer. He gets up early in the morning. He leaves the house to find solitude, and he finds a lonely place to be with God. He had been up late the night before, but still he makes it a point to get up early in order to pray.

This episode began with Jesus at the home of Simon Peter. Simon’s mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus healed her. Word spread throughout the village about what he did, and more people brought their sick to Jesus to be healed. And he did. He healed the sick and he cast out demons. Mark’s gospel

tells us the whole city came. Makes you wonder if the whole village was sick, or were they simply coming to watch him perform miracles?

In any case, Jesus gets up early in the day to pray. Did he pray in order to get new strength for the miracles of this new day? Or, was he praying in order to renew himself from the night before? The answer is yes to both questions. Jesus knew that the secret to a full and abundant life was spending time with God in prayer.

Pastor Keith Wagner, in a sermon entitled “Help Me, I’m Falling,” writes: “We live in a hi-tech, fast-pace, workaholic world where no one rests. We are constantly on the road, running errands, going places. We stuff ourselves with “fast food,” overbook our lives with a myriad of things to do, and at the end of the day we are totally exhausted.”

“The very thought of being alone, praying, scares us to death. We want professionals to do that for us... Consequently, we are on a path to self-destruction, unable to help others, let alone help ourselves.”

He then offers this insight into today’s gospel lesson. He writes, “I know that I need to build-in personal time, time to relax, time to get away. This story (about Jesus going away to pray) has reminded me to make time for myself a priority. But I have also learned something more important.”

“The story tells us that Jesus took time away to pray and be refreshed. That is explicit. What we fail to see is that Jesus set aside this time to yield to the power of God. I believe we need to yield to the power of God, too. That means being free from all other distractions so that God can empower us and refresh us. Then and only then can we help others as the power of God flows through us.”

Isaiah tells us to wait for the Lord and find our rest in Him. Renew your strength by coming to God. And so, the invitation that I’m offering this morning is simply this – “Let’s learn how to DO nothing, but simply BE in the presence of the Lord. Let’s discover the benefits of prayer, by actually doing it. We all know that we SHOULD do it, but how many of us actually practice the discipline of prayer?

It is prayer that keeps us going, in the Lord. If Jesus needed to pray, you know that WE need to pray. We need to know when to walk away, when to shut

the door, and just be quiet for a while, to give ourselves a chance to re-group our thoughts, to re-think God's will and purpose for our lives. I find that morning is my best time to be quiet.

But even in the morning, it can be hectic. Author C.S. Lewis writes, "The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes and demands for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists in shoving it all back; in listening to that *other* voice, taking that *other* point of view; letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in."

Solitude and silence don't come easy in our busy world. We're not used to it. We have to plan for it, and we have to practice it in order to become more comfortable with it. Learning to be quiet and to rest with God is essential in prayer, but most of us have not been taught how to do it.

Silence is the discipline of pushing aside words and noise in order to create space within us for God. Someone once asked a spiritual adviser, "What should I do when I pray?" "Don't do anything," was the response, "Just be with God." "But what about the wandering thoughts?" you might ask. "I don't know how to turn off the noise in my head."

Good question, and a real problem for most people. One way to calm your mind, quiet your thoughts and allow God to speak, is to use what is called a centering prayer. "What's that?" you ask. It is simply a short phrase that you repeat to yourself, over and over again. Certain Eastern religions call it a mantra.

Rest assured, I am not trying to convert you to Buddhism. Christianity also has a tradition of using short prayer phrases, using our vocabulary. So what would a Christian mantra sound like?

"Holy, holy, holy." "Come, Holy Spirit." "Lord, God." "Lord, Jesus." Find a quiet place to sit, become aware of your breathing, and then start to say the phrase you have chosen, over and over again.

When a thought enters your mind, go back to the phrase and focus on your breathing. The words will gradually become background, and quiet becomes the foreground. Prayer becomes a restful experience, simply being in God's

presence. This is a valid form of Christian prayer, using the words of our faith to allow us to “Wait for the Lord.”

It’s what Isaiah was talking about, “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God.” Isaiah 15:15 counsels, “In quietness and trust shall be your strength.” Silence and solitude are very much biblical forms of praying. I commend it to you. I try to practice it regularly.

Be patient with yourself when you’re learning this new way of praying. It takes time. Start with maybe five minutes of quiet, then increase it to 10, and as you get better, you can add more time, maybe 15 or 20 minutes. But again, I counsel you to go slow. Be patient with yourself, and don’t try to judge yourself as you practice it.

A mother took his small daughter to town with her one day to run some errands. When lunchtime arrived the two of them went to a familiar diner for a sandwich. The mother sat down on one of the stools at the counter and lifted the little girl up to the seat beside him. They ordered lunch and when the waiter brought the food, the mother said, “We’ll just have a silent prayer.”

Well, the Mom got through praying first and waited for the girl to finish her prayer. But she just sat there with her head bowed for an unusually long time. When she finally looked up, her mother asked her, “What in the world were you praying about all that time?” With the innocence and honesty of a child, she replied, “How do I know? It was a silent prayer.”

I invite us all to practice praying more often. Get up a little earlier. Find a quiet place in your house. Sit so that you’re comfortable. And just be with God for 5 to 10 minutes, to begin with. Keep it simple. Breathe slow and natural. And pray one or two words. “Holy.” “Lord, God.” Let us begin to practice waiting for the Lord. And let me know how it goes. I’ll be very curious to learn what your experience is like. May we be a praying people, Amen? Amen!