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February 8, 2009

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B, Mark 1:29-39

### A Long Day

It had been a very long day for Jesus. A very long Sabbath day. It had started that morning in the synagogue in Capernaum. As soon as the day had dawned, Jesus and his four brand-new disciples-- Simon, Andrew, James and John-- had marched right into the synagogue so Jesus could begin his teaching ministry. They seemed to pay no attention to the fact that no one gathered for morning prayer had any idea who they were!

All of the questioning looks certainly did not stop Jesus. From his behavior, you would have thought it was the synagogue from his childhood-- the place where, as a toddler, he had played peek-a-boo with one of the scribes during morning prayers; the place where, as a young boy, he had carefully scouted for hiding places for the game of Sardines; the place where, as a youth, he had sat hour after hour, trying to stay focused and alert during Hebrew school as he prepared for his bar mitzvah. By his behavior, you would have thought that Jesus was at home. He and his four brand-new disciples just walked right in and he began to teach.

And before anyone could even ask his name, a man who was thought to be possessed came forward and challenged Jesus. And Jesus did not even blink before he exorcised the demon and silenced its voice, setting the man free forever. The religious leaders and the congregation were both stunned and intrigued. "What is this?" they marveled, "A new teaching—with authority." And before Jesus had even left the building, men were running home to tell their wives and their friends about this new teacher and healer, this new miracle-working rabbi, who had arrived in town.

Then, Mark reports that Jesus, Simon, Andrew, James and John immediately went to Simon's house where his widowed mother-in-law was very ill with a fever. Simon's wife and children did not know if she would make it. And again, perhaps even before asking her name, Jesus walked over to the bed, took the woman's hand, and raised her up, healing her, giving her new life. And she immediately responded to his gift of new life, insisting on ministering to him, just like the angels had ministered to him in the wilderness. And she became the first deacon recorded in the Gospel of Mark.

And as the day began to fade into night, the crowds gathered at the door to the home. All of those men who had heard his teaching that morning brought their families. Children were hoisted up on parent's shoulders so they could get a glimpse of this Jesus. The sick were carried on pallets, or cradled in arms. Mark tells us the whole city was standing at the door. A teeming mass of adoration and deep need.

"Jesus, over here," one shouted. "No Jesus, we need you over here," another one pleaded. The four brand-new disciples could not believe their eyes. It was both exhausting and exhilarating. They had no idea just what they were getting into when they dropped their fishing nets to follow him. No idea whatsoever. Simon might have turned to his brother Andrew and said "Who knew that we would become so popular so quickly!" "You mean Jesus," Andrew might have replied, "Who knew **Jesus** would become so popular so quickly." "Yeah, yeah, that is what I meant," Simon snapped back.

And Mark tells us that Jesus healed many who were sick and cast out many demons. We are not sure why Jesus did not heal ALL of them, but that is God's business. But I would imagine that Simon, Andrew, James and John wondered the same thing. If he could heal many, why couldn't he just heal all? Perhaps it was because it was getting too late. At some point, they had to send everyone away so they could get some sleep. It had been an exhausting and incredibly long Sabbath. I bet James and John felt as if they could sleep for days. And all of them closed their eyes and drifted away.

But then, Jesus did something odd. He woke up, probably around 3am, while it was still dark, and left the house. And Mark tells us that he went out to a deserted place to pray. The Greek phrase Mark uses to describe the place is the same phrase used for wilderness. It is the same phrase used for the place where Jesus went immediately after his baptism—the place where he was tempted to be someone other than who God had created him to be as Savior, Messiah, Emmanuel. It is also the same phrase used in the beginning of this Gospel – the place where John the Baptist emerged, preaching and baptizing, shouting words of preparation and warning. Apparently, the place of wilderness is both a birthing place and a testing place for the Gospel, for faith.

And it was a place that beckoned to Jesus. So he got up and left his brand-new disciples, careful not to wake them. He slowly walked through the courtyard outside the home, his eyes scanning the small groups of people who had decided to camp out and just wait for their chance at being healed. I can just imagine that the weight of what was happening stooped his shoulders just a bit as the clusters of human need and brokenness filled his vision.

These were the first few days of Jesus' public ministry—his public growing into his identity as Messiah, Son of God, God-with-us. It had only been a few days since his wilderness experience, since his identity had been forged in the refiner's fire of temptation. And already—the crowds were huge. The pleading for help and healing reverberated in his ears. Already, the people could just not get enough of him. They saw him as one with authority. They saw him as one who stood apart. They saw him as one with divine power. They saw him as **their** Jesus.

And perhaps that is why Mark writes that Jesus returned to the wilderness place, to the deserted place, that night. Because Jesus was facing huge temptation in Capernaum. The publicity machine was in full gear. The crowds were clamoring for him. He had already become a celebrity, an overnight sensation. All he would have to do is stay there in Capernaum, and the world would come to him. He could set up his headquarters in Simon's house and do so much good for so many people. Plus, it would be much easier to do it that way, not to mention much less dangerous. He could have just stay put and be who they needed him to be.

As Jesus walked to that wilderness place, all of the “what ifs” must have bounced around in his imagination. With each step he took, perhaps he thought about all the need that he was already facing there at his doorstep. And his steps might have quickened in response. He had to get away. He had to clear his head. He had to battle with the Tempter once again and get grounded in who he was and in Whose he was.

And from the next few verses we see clearly why Jesus' brief sojourn back into the space of temptation and clarity was so important. Because at some point early that morning, Simon and the others woke up and panicked when they realized that Jesus was not there. They must have rushed around the house, looking in every room. Their anxiety levels were probably sky-high. After all, they knew that the crowds were already starting to gather outside again. They knew that as soon as morning dawned, people would be clamoring for their Jesus again. Even the men in the synagogue expected that Jesus would come back and teach again. The brand new disciples already had the itinerary for the day all set and ready for Jesus' approval. But he had disappeared. They had to find him or all their plans were ruined.

And Mark tells us that Simon and his companions hunted for Jesus. That is a rather disturbing way to put it, isn't it? It is the only time in the Gospels when that word is used—hunted. Now, it is used in the Exodus story when Pharaoh is hunting down the Hebrew slaves during their run to freedom. So what

might that tell us about Simon and his friends? Were they hunting down Jesus with the same intensity as Pharaoh? He hunted the Israelites because his property and his self-interest were at stake. Simon and his companions hunted for Jesus. You certainly get the sense that something was at stake for them too, don't you.

Finally, they found him, praying in the space of temptation. "Jesus," Simon shouted, "What are you doing? Everyone is searching for you!" Again, we must pay attention to the language that Mark uses. Our Scripture translates the verb as "searching," but it means much more than merely looking around. The verb Mark uses means literally means to search for something one has possessed/owned and has lost.

So yes – everyone was searching for Jesus, but not in a neutral way; rather, they were searching for him as if they possessed him, owned him. It had only been a few days into his public ministry but already, people were desperate to capture what they saw in Jesus and keep it all for themselves. They wanted him to be THEIR friend, THEIR leader, THEIR healer, THEIR teacher, THEIR Messiah. They needed him for themselves, and so they hunted him.

Perhaps that is another reason why Jesus had snuck off to the wilderness place again, to the place where the Gospel can both be born and tested. Perhaps he, too, was battling the temptation to be captured only for them, to be poured out only for them. He realized how easy it would be to get sucked into the hype, into the popularity, into the fame, into the neediness. He realized how easy it would be to simply set up shop there in Capernaum and let those who needed him come to him. It was tempting to let them hunt him, capture him, and keep him for themselves.

But the brief time he had in the wilderness that early morning must have helped Jesus clear his head again. That brief time in the temptation place must have given him the space to be refined again. Because Jesus looked at his disciples and answered, "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." Jesus knew that God had called him to be the savior of the **world**, not just the savior of a few. God had called him not simply to be sought, but to **seek out** the lost, the broken, the sinner, and the outcast.

In Jesus, God was the **subject** of the action, the one who initiated relationship, not the object, the one acted upon. So even though Jesus could have done a lot of good and helped a whole lot of people there in Capernaum, Jesus could not just stay there. God was calling him to move on to new territories, to new people, to new places. For the world was so broken, so in need of his good news of mercy and grace that Jesus could not afford to be captured by a few, for only a few.

And apparently, Simon, Andrew, James and John left with him that early morning. We are not told if they went back to the house to pack up and say goodbye, or if they left right then and there. We are not told what happened at Simon's house when all those people who had gathered again heard that Jesus had moved on. Maybe some of them moved on with him. I bet that many of them were disappointed. But perhaps as Jesus led those brand-new disciples away from the familiar into the new, they, too, started to see who and whose Jesus was.

And then maybe, just maybe, they started to be less concerned with capturing Jesus all for themselves, and more concerned with proclaiming Jesus for the new life of **all**.