

REST

TEXT: Mark 6:30-34, 53-66

For the past several weeks we have been taking a journey with Jesus through the Gospel of Mark. He has been busy. He healed a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. He brought back to life the young daughter of a priest. He returned to his home town of Nazareth to teach only to be rejected by the folks there. And then he faced the personal agony of learning that his cousin John had been beheaded. Today's reading tells us that the people who had heard about his great work were again bombarding him, and there was no time to rest, or even time to eat.

Wherever Jesus went, the crowds were sure to follow. Back and forth he went across the lake. He couldn't get ahead of things. People were there, ready to engage him. He was the shepherd who healed and fed the people. He welcomed all who came. He visited villages, cities and farms. As he walked through marketplaces people laid the sick at his feet and begged him for permission to touch the fringe of his cloak.

So, here is Jesus. He has just greeted his disciples returning from their first ministry tour – their inauguration into discipleship. Exhilarated and exhausted, they have stories to tell Jesus – thrilling stories of healings, exorcisms, and effective evangelistic campaigns. Perhaps there are darker stories in the mix as well – stories of failure and rejection. Hard stories they need to process privately with their teacher.

Whatever the case, Jesus senses that the disciples need a break. They're tired, overstimulated, underfed, and in significant need of solitude.

“Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile,” Jesus says to his disciples as the crowds throng around them at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. “Come away with me”, is how another translation puts it, and I see both tenderness and longing in those words. Yes, Jesus wants to provide a time of rest and recuperation for his friends. But he's weary himself; the hunger he articulates here is his own.

Sometimes we miss the little “minor” verses when we read the Gospels. Passages like “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed”, Luke tells us. Mark tells us that “when they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry”. Or Matthew, “Jesus was sleeping” or “He didn’t want anyone to know which house he was staying in”. There are perhaps “minor” verses, but they are essential glimpses of Jesus’ *human* life - the life we can perhaps relate to most easily. His need to withdraw, his desire for solitary prayer, his physical hunger, his sleepiness, his inclination to hide.

These glimpses take nothing away from Jesus’ divinity; they enhance it. They remind us that God – the God of the whole universe – hungers, sleeps, eats. Rests, withdraws, and grieves. Our God is like us.

He is also like us in that sometimes his best-laid plans go awry. According to our story, Jesus’ retreat-by-boat idea fails. The crowds anticipate his plan, and follow on foot. By the time he and his disciples reach their longed-for destination, the crowds are waiting, and the quiet sanctuary Jesus seeks is nowhere to be found.

But Jesus did not turn the boat around and sail away. According to Mark, Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat and had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began to teach them many things.

Yes, Jesus had compassion and his compassionate response to the needs of others often kept him from his own need for respite – and rest.

Rest. A break from all the bustle and activity. A chance to renew, to stop to slow. Rest. An end of work, if only for a while. Rest. An opportunity to stop doing that you may simply be. Rest.

So much is packed into Jesus’ simple invitation. We’re all familiar with the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. But usually we interpret that in light of the assumption that Sabbath means church. But this commandment would have been

unbelievably good news to people who were recently slaves whose time was never their own and who never, ever had a guaranteed period of rest. “Wait a minute”, I imagine them saying upon hearing the 10 Teachings read. “You mean we get to rest? We even *have* to rest? Glory Hallelujah!”

I suspect that many of us find ourselves in a place not all that different from the Egypt where the ancient Hebrews languished. Except our slavery is self-constructed, self-imposed and therefore far more difficult to detect or overcome. We are enslaved to notions of success, and therefore put few limits on work. We are enslaved to ideas about our children having every opportunity possible, and therefore schedule them into frenetic lives and wonder why they have a hard time focusing. We are enslaved to the belief that the only thing that will bring contentment is more – more money, more space in our homes, more cars, more things to put on our resumes or in our closets – more.

In light of this, listen again to Jesus’ simple invitation to “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile”. This is not just an invitation to take an afternoon off or go on vacation – though those may be important elements – this is an invitation to loosen our shackles and climb out of the cages we’ve constructed from a culturally-fed belief that more is the ticket to happiness and that work is the ticket to more.

Jesus did take time away. Yes, it was difficult to do. There was often little leisure time for him and his disciples to have a bite to eat. Still, Mark reminds us why Jesus sent the disciples off in the boat by themselves. Jesus needed time away to pray. We forget that Jesus needed to take time off by himself so he could reconnect with God and find inspiration so he could continue on his journey.

So, what do we hear in this passage? There is, of course, a strong message about Jesus’ acts of service. When Jesus talks about going to the “other side of the lake”, he often means “the other side of the tracks, the other side of the border, the other side of life”. Beyond the familiar, the safe, the manageable. The other side of the argument.

Another viewpoint. The other side of the conflict. The other side of yourself. The other side of the veil. The unseen.” But there is also a call to step back and experience refreshment in the presence of God. So, here is what I’d like for you to consider today. All of us live with the slavery we call success and the rat race we call modern life. So let’s be honest about how much time we spend enjoying all the things we’ve worked so hard to attain. I believe that God desires more than that for us. The abundant life doesn’t consist of merely more and more and more. “Abundant” ultimately isn’t a quantitative term but a qualitative one. So now I’ll ask you to take a pencil from the rack on the pew in front of you and write down one thing you will *not* do this week: one evening you will shut down your computer, turn off your cell phone (gasp!), one appointment you will refuse to make, one obligation or opportunity you will forgo.

Then – I’m not finished yet – write down one thing you will actually do in order to rest: one walk you will take with a friend or spouse, one game you will play with a child or neighbor, one opportunity to sit, alone or with others - not in front of the television, but simply to contemplate your blessings and abundance.

Jesus knew that time for rest, that time for renewal, time with God, is what would sustain him in the work he was sent to do. Despite all the forces that seemed to stand in his way, he found those opportunities to meet this need. I hope you will too. Let me know how the week goes for you. Amen.