

Making Time to Pray
Mark 1:29-39
February 7, 2021
5th Sunday after Epiphany

I don't know how they talked about it back then when Jesus was teaching and preaching, but today we might say that, "His career is taking off quickly," or "his star is rising," or "he is on a roll." If Jesus was on the internet, or had he made a video and uploaded it to YouTube today, we would say he had "gone viral" in a very short time!

In our text today, Jesus has just launched his career, and already the whole town is beating a path to his doorstep in order to experience his ministry. All of this without an agent or a PR person! It is important to see our text for today in its context. Remember that we are still in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel—just the very beginning.

As you heard a couple weeks ago, Jesus has just recruited four new disciples, taught at the synagogue in Capernaum, and healed a man of an unclean spirit. After the exorcism, word begins to spread over the whole region of Galilee. According to Mark, the people were amazed at his teaching in the synagogue; they were amazed at the authority with which he preached, and they were amazed that even the evil spirits obeyed him. Mark relates, "That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons, and the whole city was gathered around the door."

Can you imagine what a mob scene it must have been? The word was getting out and the news was spreading that amazing things were happening. This son of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth was teaching and preaching and performing all kinds of miracles. It was even reported in John's Gospel that he had gone to a wedding in Cana and turned water into wine. Wouldn't you have liked to have been at that wedding!

Jesus' popularity was soaring – all of this, and we're still in the first chapter of Mark! Can you imagine how good it must have felt to Jesus to have so many people responding to his ministry in such a short period of time? What would it have felt like if suddenly our attendance at church had increased exponentially when we were meeting in person? Maybe 10 times over?

Jesus became a household name in the region of Galilee – an overnight sensation, and his popularity was only increasing. For you Super Bowl fans, he didn't even

have one Super Bowl championship ring to his name! He never had his picture on the cover of the local tabloid.

He was becoming a household name. Everywhere he went, the word of his coming preceded him. Stories about his ministry were shared over and over, and you could feel the excitement and anticipation. Stories of his ministry lingered long after he departed.

Jesus must have had what they would call today a “type A” personality. He seemed to gain energy from interacting with people all day long, and well into the evening hours. He caught a few winks – maybe just a few hours sleep – and he was up early in the morning and back at it again while others were still sleeping.

Maybe all those years working with his father Joseph gave him a lot of time to think about what he would do if he were ever in this situation. Maybe he came up with some really fine sermons while working in Joseph’s carpentry shop all day long. While he was polishing and finishing off furniture, he might have thought a lot about the Scribes and Pharisees, and how he would relate to them when he got the chance. The sounds of tools at the shop may have made conversation difficult, but perfect for contemplation and reflection.

All of this by way of background helped get Jesus ready for his ministry. And so it was, Mark tells us, that after curing many with various diseases, Jesus did something rather odd in the eyes of the people -- the successful Jesus, the thoughtful Jesus, the miracle-working Jesus, everyone’s favorite guest at the wedding Jesus --Got up “Very early 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)

Finally, he could catch his breath and be alone. One would think that Jesus needed his sleep after so many long days of teaching and healing. All of the miracles he performed must have taken a huge amount of energy and concentration. It was enough to wear him out. Most people would be exhausted from the frenzy of activity – but not Jesus. He went off to a solitary place to pray.

Some people must have wondered, “”What would Jesus have to pray about anyway? Everything was going so well for him.” You could understand his going to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray during Holy Week when it looked like things were coming to a troubling end, but why at this point in his successful ministry did Jesus get up early while it was still dark, and find a solitary place to pray?

Well, could it be that Jesus was aware that the healing power he had was a gift from God, and he wanted to give thanks to the One who was the source of his

power? Jesus wanted to go to God and give thanks for all the good things that were happening in the lives of the people of Galilee. People saw Jesus at the center of the many acts of healing that he performed. But Jesus knew that it was only as he was in relationship with the One who sent him that he could continue his ministry.

It was his relationship with God that enabled him to be successful. He knew the value of praying when times were good, and though many people were grateful to Jesus for their good fortune, it was God that needed to be thanked for the generous mercy he was able to offer to so many. Jesus knew he needed to pray in order to keep that relationship strong.

Could it be that occasionally Jesus was tempted to feel good about himself and his ability to do good works? Yet, Jesus never appeared to have an ego. He knew it was not about him, but about God.

We're just a few verses from Mark's Gospel when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert for forty days and nights. We will hear more about that in a couple weeks. Do you think that had something to do with Jesus' urgent need to pray? Did he know what was looming ahead?

Sometimes he needed to go to God when tempted by the glamour of success. He needed to be reminded that his work was to preach to many villages, not just to return to the place where he was loved and admired, or rest upon his success. He knew how quickly things could fall apart if he did not pray, and so he knew it was vital to maintain a strong connection with God, even when times were good . . . especially when times were good.

Could it be that Jesus also needed to pray for strength for the next leg of his journey? Perhaps Jesus was weary of the work, successful as it was, and needed to rest in the strong arms of God for the next step into the unknown. That ought to be a good reminder for the rest of us. Don't just pray when the times are hard and you need something from God. Pray during the good times; pray when things are going well. Indeed, as Paul would say later on, "Pray without ceasing," which pretty much means to be mindful of God all day long in whatever you do. Don't wait.

Perhaps Jesus knew that after success often comes failure. Perhaps Jesus was weary or worried. Now was not the time to forget to pray – not for him, and not for us. While things were going well, Jesus got up early in the morning while it was still dark, and went off to a solitary place to pray.

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This is a very important passage. Too often, we just go to God and pray when there is a problem, or we find ourselves in the midst of a crisis – like when we're sick or in pain, or experiencing grief, we are quick to turn to God in prayer. Anybody can pray at times like that, and we should not hesitate. When people can't pay their bills or their children make bad choices, or too many people are depending upon you and you never have time alone, we're quick to turn to God in prayer.

The message in Mark 1 is that when the times seem to be good, it is a good time to go to God in prayer. In the best of times we need to pray to strengthen our relationship with God, and our faith will be made strong when we run across more difficult times. In the best of times we need to thank God for what God is allowing to happen through us, and pray that it will stay that way as we reach out to others.

In the text this morning, Jesus is encouraging us by his example. When things are going well for us, Jesus does not want us to toss out a little prayer while we're busy doing other things. Martin Luther used to say, "The busier I am, the more time I take to pray." Sounds like good advice.

Get up early in the morning, or perhaps late at night when there are fewer distractions, and find a place to be alone and pray. It might be a time and place that is quiet enough that we can listen to God's claim upon our lives, as well as speak everything we have to share, even in the best of times. God is listening. Are you? Amen

Mark 1:29-39

1:29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.

1:30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.

1:31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

1:32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.

1:33 And the whole city was gathered around the door.

1:34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

1:35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

1:36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him.

1:37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."

1:38 He 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."

1:39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.