

Action, and Prayer

The Gospel according to Mark is the shortest of the four canonical Gospels. It offers the teachings of Jesus, as the other gospels do, but it is also a gospel of action, and that action moves quite fast. I have mentioned before that there is a certain word Mark likes to use throughout his gospel. It is the Greek word "eutheos." Eutheos is best translated as "immediately," but Mark uses it so often that most English translators substitute other words for it to avoid the repetition. So, instead of using immediately again and again, translations will use "straightaway" or "at once" or even "and." Here are a few examples of this word from the first chapter of Mark:

- Immediately, as Jesus came out of the waters, he saw the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descend like a dove.
- Immediately the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness.
- When Jesus called Andrew and Simon, immediately they left their nets and followed.
- Jesus went farther and saw two more fishermen and immediately he called them.

In all, the word eutheos/immediately is found over forty times in Mark's gospel.

Last week's Gospel reading described that while Jesus was in Capernaum on the Sabbath, he immediately entered the synagogue and began teaching. Immediately, he encountered a man with an unclean spirit, and Jesus cast the spirit out. Today we heard that immediately, having left the synagogue Jesus and the disciples entered the home of Simon, whose mother-in-law who was ill. Jesus cures her, and after she recovers, she attends to them. That same evening, the whole town gathered outside the door of the house, and they brought to Jesus all those who were sick, or possessed, and he healed many of them. The action doesn't stop; early the next morning, while it is still dark outside, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off by himself to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

Simon and his companions notice Jesus was missing, so they went hunting for him. "Everyone is searching for you," they tell him, because there is still more to do in the town. Jesus answered them, "Let's keep moving; let's go into the neighboring towns and villages so that I can proclaim the kingdom of God there. For that is what I came to do."

This all takes place within twenty-four hours! Teaching, worship in the synagogue, casting out a demon, more healing, then moving on to the next town. Doing one important thing immediately after another.

But in the middle of this story, among all the movement and activity of this remarkably busy day, there comes this one quiet and peaceful sentence. It is verse 35: "In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up, went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." It happens so quickly among all the action we might miss it. Jesus prayed. In a quiet moment, in a deserted place. There he prayed.

Jesus was certainly active, especially as described in Mark's gospel. The needs around him were pressing and often urgent. But Jesus never lost sight of what was also necessary: prayer, and quiet, and spending time in God's presence. You may have noticed in today's Gospel reading that the town brought to Jesus *all* who were sick or possessed with demons. An immense need. And Jesus cured *many* who of them and cast out *many* demons. Many, but not all. There was still work that could have used his attention. Yet, early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus realized that the next thing to do, immediately, was to go pray.

There is this overarching rhythm in the ministry of Jesus: there is activity in the busy world, where he and his disciples work for the kingdom of God, bringing light and healing and compassion to others. And there is time for withdrawal, for quiet, and prayer, and simply being in God's presence. Jesus invited his disciples into the same pattern. He send them out to do the work he was doing, then he calls them to "come away for a while" to rest and pray. So it is for us: we are to go out into the world doing the ministry God calls us to. We work hard, with a sense of urgency, or even immediacy, as Jesus did. And then we pray, we rest, we reflect, remember that we belong to God, and that God loves us and is with us.

At the heart of his worship and his work, Jesus knew that what he did was not just for himself, it was for others. As Jesus received from God, he gave to others. As we receive freely from God, we are to give. This, too, is part of the pattern, part of the rhythm of following God.

This has always been true for the people God calls. Through the prophet Isaiah, God spoke to the people of Israel when they were in exile, far from home, in a time of terrible difficulty and uncertainty. The word of the Lord came to Isaiah and offered

these words of hope. “Do you not know?” God asks. “Do you not understand? Have you forgotten? God is the creator of heaven and earth. God does not faint or grow weary. But God gives power to the faint. God strengthens the powerless. You, O Israel, you may fall, as even the young and strong among you will grow weary and fall exhausted. But I the Lord will be with you. And those who trust in me, and wait for me, 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.”

And this promise from God was not given for Israel alone. Later in the book of Isaiah, God reminds them that they are called not just for themselves, but to be a blessing for the world. The Lord proclaims to them, “I will give you as a light to the nations, so you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

When Simon’s mother-in-law is healed, the first thing she did was to serve others. Later that day, her home would become a place of healing for people gathered from the whole town. As Jesus brings healing and strength to us, we are to offer it to others. The word used for this act of service by Simon’s mother-in-law is “diakonia.” It is the basis of our word for diaconate, the ministry of the deacon. The deacon is one who reminds the church that we are all called to serve. We receive, and then we are to give it away. We are renewed in prayer and worship, then we are called to offer God’s love in service to others.

Action and retreat. Work, and worship. Engagement and prayer. Hearing God’s call to us, and then being Christ’s presence in the world. This is the great pattern that Jesus lived, and he calls us to follow. Too often, we often don’t move far enough in either direction: We don’t really take the time to pray, to be with God. And when we go out into the world, we don’t fully give ourselves to that, either. And if we don’t go very deep, our spiritual life will lack depth, and our activity in the world will lack power.

How do you and I live in the middle of all the busy-ness of our daily lives? How do we react when life is moving at a hectic pace all around us, when we move from one thing immediately to the next? Where do we turn when there is more to do than we can possibly hope to get done? What do we do when it is dark, and the needs seem to be gathered right outside our door?

Do we take time for quiet and prayer? It is easy to tell ourselves that we are too busy to pray because our lives are so busy and demanding. Remember today's story from Mark's Gospel. Jesus was plenty busy, too. But he knew what mattered. He knew *who* mattered. There was time for action and ministry, yes. And there was time to wait upon the Lord, to pray and listen, and be still.

We are promised that those who wait upon the Lord, shall renew their strength, they will rise up on the wings of eagles. They are then called to offer the salvation of God to others. Jesus, show us how to pray, and how to serve. Lord, bless us in our worship and in our work. Amen.

Trace Browning

Year B – 5th Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 40: 21-31 • Psalm 147: 1-12, 26c • 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 • Mark 1:29-39

Preached at All Saints Episcopal Church – Salt Lake City, Utah

4 February 2024