

Sitting in the Dark

Mark 1:29-39

February 4, 2024

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May the God....

It's been a time. Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist, propelled into the Wilderness for 40 days tempted by Satan, called Simon and Andrew, James and John to be his first disciples, exorcised and cast out his first demon, done a teaching in the synagogue with a remarkable amount of authority, healed Simon's mother in law of a fever just in time for dinner, spent an entire evening healing any and every one in Capernaum, and that's not even the end of the first chapter of Mark.

But now, *"Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer."* (Mark 1:35)

It is the dark time, the after time, the morning time, the before time: prayer time. Jesus leaves the crowded communal house and makes his way to a place where he can just be, a place away where he can pray. A place in the dark. He goes away in the dark, to pray.

What does this look like, this time away, before most of the household stirs? When Jesus gets up and goes off, while everyone else snuffles and snores in that time before light? There is a discipline here, a ritual with effort, to wake before the rest. I imagine, him rising out of the corner, rolling off a thin pallet, folding his blanket, putting on a cloak, and perhaps grabbing a mat, dew is prevalent in that part of the world. Who wants to start a day with a damp rear end? I envision him walking up a hill, to get a better view of the sea of Galilee, finding a southeast facing rock, dropping his mat and then sitting down and leaning back. Being, listening, and breathing. Perhaps invoking one of the ancient prayers for the morning,

"Let us not be ruled over by the evil inclination. Keep us far from an evil person, and from an evil companion, make us hold fast to the Good..."

Or reciting a psalm,

"In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I make my appeal and watch for you...(Psalm 5:3)

Or maybe Jesus just sat in the dark, longing for God.

I relish sitting and being in the dark. I'm not the world's best prayer. It's no surprise to anyone who knows me that it's not my first instinct to just sit and be. But there is

something, when I wake early, in the deep silence, the sleeping world around, that propels me to pause, to sink onto a pillow on the floor and breathe. When it's Advent or Christmas, I tend to sit in front of our lit tree, letting my eyes wander over all of our ornaments that offer an historical snapshot and an archeological dig into our people, places and passions.

During the rest of the year, I sit where I can see the street. I'll breathe, wish momentarily that I was a wise monastic, overflowing with spiritual wisdom. Then I'll let that go and sometimes intone the words of the 51st psalm, "Create in a Clean Heart O God and renew a right spirit within me. Then perhaps a chunk of scripture sometimes from the Daily Office or these days a slow sequential reading of Matthew's Gospel as offered in the Indigenous Translation of the New Testament. Then I mull it over and think about who needs prayer. Or reflect on what went right or wrong the day before and what people and events are looming for the coming day. I try to envision how I might be, and ask God to be with me, to remind me, that it is in God that we live and move and have our being. Then or before then, one of my dogs asks to clean my oatmeal bowl and I get distracted. And the light is up and it's time to move.

At various points in our lives, different rhythms emerge. I know some parents of very little ones, use the middle of the night feedings to remember God. I know some parents who want to do that, but are so darn tired, prayer then seems like one more chore.

Those of us of a certain age, have sleep patterns that demand we lie awake, much to our great dismay. So why not take those interruptions as moments to seek out God? I admit sometimes I'm so distressed that I cannot sleep, I'm swearing more than praying.

I have imaginings about other people's prayer time, but as the years have gone by, I've done my best to lay down my inclination for a side-by-side comparison, for it doesn't seem to move me to a holier place.

A line from Psalm 46, speaks of God saying to us, "Be still and know that I am God." (46:10)

The apostle Paul says, that sometimes when we do not know what to pray for or how to do it, "the very spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." (Romans 8:26-27).

Regardless of how I manage to pray, what I wind up saying, I have found that for me, the secret is the act of getting up and being in the dark. That act, somehow matters. It's somehow sacred and holy being in the dark.

Episcopal Priest and author, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Resurrection is always announced with Easter Lilies, the sound of trumpets and bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave, [she writes] it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air...New life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark." (*Learning to Walk in the Dark* p 129.)

I'm not a mystic or a monastic, when it comes to prayer, I'm just kind of mediocre, but then I remember, it's not really about me. Those moments before dawn, many days, I remember.

There are so very many things that Jesus did, that I cannot now and am likely never, ever to be able to do, but sitting in the dark, breathing, sighing, waiting for God, well that is one thing I can do. In this time in this world, you can too.

Amen.