

We've A Story to Tell
Isaiah 40: 21-31 and Mark 1: 29
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
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Oh, what a day in the life of Jesus! The Gospel of Mark begins with Jesus calling disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Off they go to the synagogue where Jesus amazes the people and disciples with the authority of his speaking. A man believed to be possessed, confronts Jesus. Without breaking his rhythm, Jesus exorcizes the demon, silencing its voice. The demon dashes out and the man is free. It is on to the home of Simon and Andrew where he learns Simon's mother-in-law is ill with a high fever. He heals her. By evening the works and wonders of Jesus spread by word of mouth and people came from all over the region. They brought all who were sick, those who could not walk or speak. They brought those who were dying and those who were possessed by demons. They came. The curious. The crying. Parents, with kids on their shoulders, wanting to see this great teacher and healer. And Jesus cures many. The four fishermen who had just dropped their nets that morning stand in awe. They are excited, exhausted, and they are overwhelmed.

Sounds like a recap of 2020 to me. As many do, we start a new year, a new adventure, a new relationship with excitement. Along the way, many unknowns pop up. That is not unusual. But our unknowns this past year were like popcorn kernels that would not stop popping. For so many, life morphed into exhaustion and all the popping pushed them to the edge or into an ocean of overwhelming. From my own experience, real or perceived, I felt like I was "on" 24/7, and the only path that gave me peace was prayer, those times I put all that was exhausting and overwhelming, and even exciting into the hands of God. This story about a day in the life of Jesus and Isaiah's story about the day to day living of God's people have much to tell us about prayer.

In the chaos that surrounded Jesus, theologian Henri, Nouwen finds an invitation from Jesus to us: to be still, o breath, to pray. He writes: *In the center of breathless activities, we hear a restful breathing. Surrounded by hours of moving we find a moment of quiet stillness. In the heart of much involvement there are words of withdrawal. In the midst of action, there is contemplation. And after much togetherness there is solitude. The more I read this nearly silent sentence locked in between the loud words of action, the more I have the sense that the secret of Jesus' ministry is hidden in that lonely place where he went to pray, early in the morning, before dawn.*

Mark tells us that it was so early when Jesus awoke it was still dark, and that he did not go any old place to pray. Many of the translations we have call the place a desert, but the Greek word is more like wilderness. It is the same word used to describe the place of John the Baptizer's proclamation and Jesus' temptation. As ominous as that sounds, it is from experiences in the wilderness, John and Jesus receive God's power to do the mission set apart for them.

Mark knows that Jesus needs wilderness time, needs to be lifted up, needs his strength renewed. And Jesus knows exactly who will do this, the One who has called him Beloved Son.

By now, the disciples are beginning to grasp their need for Jesus and when they could not find him, panic set in and they started hunting for him. In the entirety of the Gospels, this is the only time the word "hunted" is used. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for hunted is used in the story of Pharaoh as he is chasing after the Israelites. With the loss of these Hebrew slaves, Pharaoh had much to lose. Is the same true for the disciples if they could not find Jesus? And, without Jesus fully engaged in our lives, what do we lose?

When Simon finds Jesus, he yells out, "What have you been doing?" No reply from Jesus, but we know that God has been renewing his strength. If yesterday was his first day of ministry, what will the new day bring? Jesus needs the wings of eagles holding him up. He wants to run and not be weary, wants to walk and not faint. He knows that if he is to lift up others, he himself must also be lifted up. And the everlasting God, the one who

does not faint or grow weary keeps his promise. After a night in the wilderness praying, Jesus says, “Let us go! We have a story to tell that the world needs to hear!” It was and will always be a story of God’s faithfulness and God’s promised hope through Jesus.

That same faithful God did not fail the people of Israel, held captive, living like refugees in a foreign land. From the heart of God to the lips of Isaiah, God speaks a word that does not sound much like hope. It is actually a word of warning, but one intended to remind them that in this wilderness time, they know to whom they can turn and talk. In a time of unbearable grief, Isaiah calls the people to muster up their memories of God: *Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? How can you forget the One who created the universe, the One who does not sleep or grow weary of watching over the world, the One who does not forget you?*

But, from where they sit as slaves, it would be easy to forget Jerusalem, easy to forget to share the stories of their family and faith. Easy to forget the mighty power of God. But it is exactly remembering that Isaiah says they must do to be lifted up in the comfort, the hope and salvation God has promised them.

We share something in common with the Israelites. As my kids would say, the world is a “hot mess.” No longer is Christianity the dominant religion and we can no longer assume that someone will tell others the story of God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ. As followers of Christ, we must commit to keeping God’s story of hope alive.

However, through Isaiah and Jesus, God is honest with us. We will grow tired when we run the race of faith. We will grow weary when we walk in the will of our Lord. It is not meant to be a 24/7 job, but following Jesus is a 24/7 way of living. But as promised, when we tell God’s story of love and salvation in Jesus, our strength will be renewed as if we were being lifted up and carried on eagles’ wings.

When we find ourselves in wilderness places, Jesus continues to invite us to be still. To breath. To pray. Just as the Israelites were called to remember that God was already waiting for them beyond Babylon, Jesus invites us at this Table today, to remember he too lifts us in prayer to the One who holds our hand, who raises us up and who stands ready to renew our strength, even and especially in the wilderness places of our lives.

Through prayer, may we be strengthened to continue telling the story of the God who was and is and will ever be faithful, the story of Jesus Christ our Lord who saves us, and the story of the Holy Spirit who sustains us! Amen.