

"The Lonely Place"

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 5

8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday, February 5, 2012

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Mark 1:29–39

There is nothing more tempting than a lonely place; a place where phones don't ring and loud voices all shouting at once don't compete for our attention. A lonely place where we can hear ourselves think, feel our own calmed breathing, rediscover the inner rhythms which seek in vain to regulate our lives. A lonely place where we can listen to the wind, or, perhaps, to the full and wise sound of silence; a lonely place free from the drone of television and the

condemnation of calendars; a place of rest and peace. There is nothing more tempting than a lonely place.

Listen, again, to a very simple and profound verse in the middle of our Gospel lesson this morning, but listen to it in a more accurate translation: “And in the morning,” Mark tells us, “a great while before day, Jesus rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed.”

There is nothing more tempting than a lonely place, and most of us search eagerly for such a place. For some of us, the lonely place is actually a *place*, a spot in the mountains where the air is hushed and the world below seems serene; a piece of sand along a white beach where we can lose our thoughts among the rhythm of the waves and the vast gray expanse before us; or even a private place nearer to home where we

can walk to be alone even for a few moments at the end of the day.

For others, the lonely place might actually be a *time*; a time of solitude in the car between appointments or activities; a last cup of morning coffee with only the accompaniment of a humming refrigerator; or a few minutes watching the fire die in the fireplace, the house silent after a full day.

There is nothing more tempting than a lonely place, like any of the scenes I just painted this morning. We all seek such places, guard them, and cherish them. “And in the morning, a great while before day, Jesus rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed.”

One commentator I read, who was trying to explain something of this lonely place, talked about the college he attended as an undergraduate. At Barton College in

Wilson, North Carolina, the religion students built a small round building on the campus and named it "The Still Point." It was a simple building built on a quiet part of the campus. It was supposed to be an oasis of quietness in what was sometimes a desert of stress and strain. This commentator-pastor spoke of going there often to, as he said, "seek the still point in my own heart." Then in his commentary he wrote this: "How very often Jesus sought out a quiet place like in today's text. It was the beginning of his ministry and he was already seeking that still point, that place where he could commune with God without distractions."

Now, who am I to argue with a published commentator? He is right, of course, Jesus did seek out that lonely place to recharge his batteries on a regular basis. He did go away by himself to pray, to refocus his energies. But there was more to this lonely

place than just a quiet place of retreat and I think the commentator missed that in his analysis.

You see, the word in this text translated “lonely place” or, “deserted place” is *eramos*, and “lonely place” is too gentle a translation of this word, because it hints at untroubled tranquility, a winter’s day with the snow quietly falling and making the world a white wonderland. A better rendering of this word is “wilderness,” which connotes a place filled with danger, where the spirits lurk and temptation stalks. Mark uses this word *eramos* many times in his opening chapter, and it always carried the meaning of a place where crucial and risky decisions are being made. It is out in the *eramos* that John the Baptizer fills the air with a cry for repentance. John is, in Isaiah’s words, the “voice of one crying in the *eramos*.” Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the *eramos* to be tempted, and the *eramos* is inhabited both by angels and wild beasts. The *eramos*

is the place where God's will is made clear and where the demand for obedience becomes most urgent. It is also the place where the temptation to disobey is felt most powerfully. The *eramos* is a holy place, alive with the presence of God. The *eramos* is also a dangerous place, an atmosphere charged with the possibility of betrayal. And it is to this *eramos*, this lonely place, where Jesus went that morning to pray.

Do you see why I think the commentator got his picture wrong? Mark wants us to know that, in a way we have perhaps not imagined, there is indeed nothing more tempting than a lonely place, because the lonely place, when it is truly a place of coming to grips with what is most urgent about life and important about ourselves, is finally not a place of calm, but of temptation. The lonely place to which Jesus went was not a placid retreat, but a place of crisis and decision.

And the temptation came soon enough and in a surprising form. Peter and those with him found Jesus and said, "Everyone is searching for you." Just that. Like most real temptations, this one hardly seems like a temptation, but in this apparently innocent sentence there is a deep enticement for Jesus. "Everyone is searching for you." In other words, come back. Come back to Capernaum and stay, stay where you healed the sick and astonished the people with your preaching. People love and admire you there. Come back. Let your ministry end where it began. Become Capernaum's local wonder worker, their private priest. Everyone is searching for you. Come back and stay.

There was Jesus in the *eramos*, the lonely place, with two paths leading out. One path led back to Capernaum and a life of comfortable popularity. The other path led on to Golgotha and a costly sacrifice. One path led to a place where all were crying,

“Hosanna!” The other path led to a place where all would cry, “Crucify him!”

Don't you see, my friends? The lonely place was no place of serene reflection; it was a place of momentous decision, the kingdom of self-interest and self-preservation verses the Kingdom of God. And facing the tempter yet again, Jesus decided: “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out.”

As spiritual writer and trappist monk Henri Nouwen has stated: “In the lonely place Jesus finds the courage to follow God's will and not his own; to speak God's words and not his own; to do God's work and not his own.”

When we, likewise, chose to follow Jesus there are lonely places for us as well. Not the gentle lonely places of retreat from the pressures of life, but the

wilderness places and times when, in the midst of crisis or simply heightened awareness, we must choose between our own will and God's, between our own words and God's, between our own work and God's.

Sometimes the lonely wilderness is a place of tumult, a place we would not go unless we had been driven there. A marriage falls apart, a job is lost, a loved one suffers in pain, one we had trusted betrays us. These are lonely places, and their perils are all too clear.

Sometimes, when the lonely place is a place of great disturbance, it evokes our rage against God, but that only serves to clarify God's presence in our lives. Shaking our angry fists at God means that we take God seriously and rather than denying His power, it actually places us in his presence.

Most of the time, though, our wilderness places are not nearly as turbulent as that. They are the quieter and more gentle places, the places close to home and ordinary routine, the spaces between the multitude of activities in our lives, where we nonetheless make the crucial decisions of our lives.

The late Carlyle Marney was once asked where the Garden of Eden was located. "Two fifteen Elm Street, Knoxville, Tennessee," he replied. The questioner found that incredulous and challenged Marney with the notion that the Garden of Eden was somewhere in Asia. Marney said that you couldn't prove that by him, because it was at Two Fifteen Elm Street that, as a boy, he had stolen some money from his mother's purse and gone to the store and spent it on candy. When he returned he was so ashamed he hid in the closet. "It was there my mamma found me," he said, "and asked, 'where are you? Why are you hiding? What have you

done?'" The Garden of Eden, the place of temptation, the lonely place, was, for Marney, on 215 Elm Street.

The lonely place, the place of temptation and decision, the place where we decide to follow God's call or our own noses, can be a breakfast table or a closet, a moment of insight reading a novel or an argument with someone we love, in the morning or at night, when we are tired or when we are refreshed, in the singing of a hymn or in the sighing of a prayer, in the second act of a play or even . . . in the middle of a sermon.

In this month's *Lutheran* magazine, there is a cartoon of a woman parishioner greeting the pastor at the door of the church following worship and commenting to him: "I did a lot of thinking during your sermon and I've come to a decision – I'm going with pot roast tonight."

I had a member of the congregation where I served many years ago call me one time mid-week. She said that she had listened to my sermon on Sunday. I expressed my thanks since I just don't do this for my own amusement. Then she said, "No, I mean I really listened. And because of what you said, I've decided to leave my husband."

"What?" I fairly screamed into the receiver, because I didn't think that's what I said in my sermon. "You're leaving your husband because of something I said in a sermon?"

"Yes," she responded. "He's been abusive our whole marriage and your words about hope let me know that I'm not a bad person. Your words gave me the courage and inspiration to move on in my life and do something more meaningful than serve as his punching bag."

Even a sermon, as my friend illustrates, can be a lonely place, a place of decision, a place of peril, and a place of holiness; a place to encounter God and find God's direction for our lives. A lonely place is where we decide whether we shall go where we have been sent by God, or go where our desires or fears take us. Jesus chose to go where he was sent, and because he did, he was able to come to our town, too. And he is here even now, in our lonely places, beckoning us, if we will, to follow.

AMEN.

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