

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 8, 2009
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

2 Kings 4:8-37
Psalm 142
I Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

Our Gospel lesson today finds Jesus and his disciples at the home of Simon and Andrew, where Simon's mother-in-law is bedridden with a high fever.

There were numerous "faith healers" in Jesus' day, even as there are today. Most of them were charlatans and frauds who would create a dramatic public display for performing their healings. They would shout and use loud incantations and really make a spectacle of things.

Jesus, however, does this healing work in private, in a home. There is no spectacle, no fireworks, no public display. He simply takes the woman by the hand and gets her up, and her fever leaves her.

Then Mark tells us that people from all over Capernaum bring those who are sick and tormented to the house, and they watch as Jesus touches them and heals them.

What happens next intrigues me. We are told that early in the morning, before dawn, Jesus retreats into the wilderness to be alone and to pray.

On the surface we would say, "what is so interesting or unusual about that?" After all, we all know that Jesus needed to recharge his spiritual batteries after

periods of intense ministry with people, for the Gospels tell us this numerous times.

And we find this to be a true principle for our own emotional health. We alternate periods of heavy engagement with people and the world with periods of solitude, times where we can be alone to think and to pray. It's an important rhythm which helps us to stay balanced in our lives.

And while I understand this principle and agree with it, what makes this text so intriguing to me is that I don't believe that is what Jesus is doing here, at least not primarily. I believe something deeper may be at work, something that began at Jesus' baptism when the voice from heaven said, "you are my beloved Son."

Mark tells us that Jesus retreats into the "wilderness" to be alone. The word has a long history in the Scriptures. In many cases the wilderness is not just a place of solitude, not simply a neutral place to be alone and to be quiet, but a place of great testing, a place of great struggle and spiritual warfare.

Mark could have used another term to tell us that Jesus needed to be alone to pray. But he tells us that Jesus goes into the "wilderness," the place of testing, the arena of struggle. Is it possible that something more than taking a few minutes of quiet time to recharge the inner battery is happening here?

But even if this is true, what is Jesus struggling with? What is the conflict?

As awkward as it may be to wonder this, and to ask it, I wonder if Jesus is not having an identity crisis here. I wonder if he is being tested and tempted to abandon what was spoken to him at his baptism, where he was proclaimed the beloved Son of the Father.

Think with me for a moment. Jesus has barely launched his public ministry. He is in Capernaum, where we saw last week that he taught in the synagogue and healed a man, and he did it with such authority that those who saw it were left scratching their heads and asking, “who is this guy?”

Because of that, news of Jesus spreads like wildfire in the region, and people come from all over to see what is going on. After he heals Simon’s mother-in-law, people start showing up from all over the region, and Jesus heals and touches them as well.

This finds Jesus retreating to the wilderness to pray. We’re not told what happens there, but I can imagine Satan coming to Jesus and saying, “hey, Jesus, why don’t you just stay here in Capernaum? You don’t need to move on down the road to Jerusalem. Just stay here where the crowds are clamoring for you.”

I think that what may be happening here is that Jesus is being tempted to bypass his true mission and calling. He’s being tempted to forget who he really is, to forget the words spoken to him at his baptism. He’s being tempted to allow his identity and ministry to be shaped solely in terms of the great wonder worker, the

great healer. He's being tempted to stay in Capernaum, to exit off of the road that eventually leads to Jerusalem. But to do so would circumvent his identity as the Suffering Servant, the One who shows his divine authority through suffering love.

This may account, in part, for what has come in Mark to be known as the "Messianic Secret," where Jesus often forbids both demons and disciples to speak directly of his true identity. It may be that Jesus is trying to prevent a distorted understanding of his true identity from becoming his "true" identity.

So then, as Jesus is here in the wilderness praying, it may be that he is being tempted to become a victim of his own success. To let *part* of who he is become his whole identity. To let his success in Capernaum prevent him from moving on to other villages, and eventually to Jerusalem.

In these moments of quiet and solitude, God strengthens Jesus to remain true to his calling and to his true identity. When present circumstances scream out, "stay where you are," Jesus tells his disciples, "it's time for us to move on." It's time for me to stay true to who I am, and what I've been called to do.

I believe that the same Spirit that strengthened Jesus to stay true to who he was is also at work in this congregation, and in our lives. The Spirit is at work among us, helping us to remain faithful to our calling to be a church in the Wesleyan tradition that worships according to the ancient pattern of Word and Table. We've had occasions to compromise that through the years, but God has

providentially helped us to remember who we are and what we've been called to do.

And the Spirit is also at work in each of you, reminding you who you are as God's beloved Sons and daughters. In times where you may be tempted to take shortcuts or to lay aside God's will for your life, the Spirit gently nudges you and gets you back on the road again, reminding you that you still have miles to go before you arrive home.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let us come with the assurance that the Christ who meets us here is faithful to us, and will help us to remain faithful to our own calling and ministry, even as the Father helped him to remain faithful to his calling and ministry.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.