

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Epiphany 5
Mark 1:29-39

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Today's program is sponsored by Susie Carter in memory of her beloved husband Bev Carter.

It was the sense of scale that made a deep impression on me. Up until that point, when I thought about things in the wild, the picture that came to mind was a forest. Maybe part of the reason for that comes from stories in childhood that described children lost in the woods like Hansel and Gretel, or running away from the Evil Queen into the woods like Snow White in the Disney movie. Or maybe part of the reason was that the house I grew up in in Pennsylvania bordered on some woods that I explored sometimes as a child. My mental picture of the wilderness included a lot of trees.

When I went on a pilgrimage to the land where Jesus lived and went out to the wilderness there, I was struck by the fact that there wilderness is the exact opposite. There are no trees. There are no growing things of any kind. The ground is completely barren. The sky is completely empty. There is nothing around you. And the nothingness goes on for miles and miles, as far as you can see. I was overwhelmed with the enormity of the scale, how vast the emptiness of the wilderness was. It felt like being in touch with infinity. The worries I had brought with me into the wilderness seemed very different when I looked at them from that perspective.

I have a different appreciation now of what the scriptures are talking about when they talk about the wilderness. And they do talk about the wilderness. As soon as Mark's gospel begins, it quotes Isaiah writing of "the voice of one crying in the wilderness". Then in the next verse, "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness..." Jesus appears and is baptized, and as soon as he hears the voice from heaven, "The spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan." It isn't all wilderness time: Jesus goes back into society, to places where people work, such as the fishing village where he calls his disciples from their boats and nets, to places where people worship, such as the synagogue where he teaches, to places where people live, such as the home of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, where he heals her from her fever.

Word gets out that there is someone who can heal the sick and cast out demons. As soon as the Sabbath is over, the crowds come to him. As Mark puts it, "That evening, at sundown,

they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.”

And what happens next is what tugs on my attention. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. The deserted place is, of course, the wilderness.

Jesus is willing to get right into the crowds and the clamor and the bodily fluids and the smells and the physical and spiritual effort it requires to do that work. And then he goes away to a place that is uncluttered to be in silence and solitude with God. He knows that the demands of that work, even though it's good work, can swallow you up if you're not careful. This is so important that Jesus gets up early in the morning while it is still dark and everyone else is asleep, to renew his connection with God, with silence, with solitude, with infinity.

From time to time I hear people talking about achieving balance in our lives. It often brings to mind images of things like a waitress balancing multiple plates of food on her hands and arms; it can be done, but at any moment the slightest motion can cause everything to fall crashing to the floor.

Rather than a balance that so often seems precarious, I wonder whether we would be better off thinking of aspects of our lives as being complementary, the complementary with an “e” in which the different things complete each other, creating wholeness.

I believe that is what Jesus is doing here: the complementary aspects of interacting with people and solitude with God, the complementary aspects of talking and silence, the complementary aspects of work and prayer.

This does not happen automatically; it is a choice. Without that choice, the never-ending needs of the world would overwhelm anyone. In fact, as Jesus is praying, Mark tells us, “Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘everyone is searching for you.’” It would be easy to give in to that. There are so many unmet needs that they could take over his life. But Jesus is able to do the ministry he does because he chooses to take time to maintain his connection with God as well as time to meet the needs of the people around him.

And here we get to the opportunity for how this can apply to our own lives. It is always good to follow the example of Jesus in these complementary aspects of our lives. The timing of

this passage is particularly helpful in providing a way to put that into practice. This year, Ash Wednesday falls on February 14th. So we have ten days in which to reflect on what you would like your Lenten practice to be this year. It is valuable to keep in mind the ideas about these complementary aspects of our spiritual lives as you reflect on this. It may be that you are spending more time in solitude than you really want to, and for your Lenten practice you might want to find a way that you can serve others on a regular basis during Lent. Or it may be that you are busy meeting other people's needs, and a Lenten practice that would be complementary to that would be setting aside some time each day for prayer alone with God.

One of the things I like about Lent is that you can do something to enrich your spiritual life, and since it lasts for a limited amount of time, 40 days, you can do something that stretches you a little without worrying about whether you'll be able to keep it up forever. You can choose which of these complementary aspects you want to pay more attention to: is it the doing, serving, healing, teaching, meeting needs, solving problems, giving? Or is it the stillness, solitude, prayer, wilderness, experience of infinity?

We don't happen to live in the same climate and geography that Jesus did, so our experience of God in the wilderness will be different. Taking time in silence and solitude to renew our relationship with God can take a variety of forms, just as meeting the needs of humanity can take a variety of forms. What is important is that we choose to do it. In a society that is filled with too much noise and too many shiny objects, we do not always notice what our souls long for. Jesus reminds us that it is worth paying attention to.