

**August 16, 2015**

**“God for us, in us, with us”**

**Mark 1:35  
The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair**

**“In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”**

**Mark 1:35**

Our sermon scripture this morning is just one sentence, but it is packed with plenty of punch. Allow me to set the scene, briefly.

The scene takes place very early in Mark’s Gospel, but the events have been happening very fast. Jesus has suddenly appeared, drawing crowds with his quick and sure miracles. He has been summarily casting out demons, healing the sick, curing the possessed. The whole city of Capernaum is now at his door, (and why not?)

It seems that Jesus has been up all night doing this- exorcising, healing, restoring, bringing health and wholeness, and then we’re quickly delivered this one line, unexpected, packed with meaning:

**“In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”**

Besides the very potent foreshadowing that Mark gives us with these opening eight words, (‘in the morning, while it was still dark’)- exactly the words he uses to preface Mary’s journey to the tomb to find Jesus no longer there, but risen... and a new universe of understanding unveiled; there is another message available to us here, totally in sync with Richard’s Rohr’s understanding of Step 11 in AA’s Twelve Step process.

**“We seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us, and the power to carry that out.”**

Now, if Jesus wasn't doing that when he went out to that deserted place, I don't know what he was doing....

For the sake of clarity, there were two complimentary movements going on in what Jesus was doing. There were outward and inward dimensions in what Jesus was all about. Jesus was overwhelmed by the demands of the multitudes around him, swamped by all those who sought what they thought they could get from him, yet from the disciples’ perspective, all they could see was success. Fame and reputation were the heady energies

that drew people to hunt for Jesus. Outwardly, his success was undeniable. Inwardly, it was draining.

Apparently, Jesus didn't bask in notoriety or headlines. He took the necessary time to seek solitude for sanity's sake. (And this wasn't the only time he did so.) Jesus called followers, but he didn't court fans. His concern was first and always to get the message out.

Jesus' foundational identity, reclaimed in prayer, moved him away from the crowds that sought him.

He was better able to recharge his batteries, as it were, on his own. No, that's not quite right. Jesus was better able-- like all of us, to tap into God's graciousness in solitude and serenity rather than in the midst of the maddening, demanding crowd. It is a gift that is necessary for all of us, and a gift that we too often dismiss, to our own detriment.

Jesus was overwhelmed and regained himself, off & alone, early in the morning, while it was still dark.

That phrase still sticks with me: when it was still dark/when clarity had not yet arrived, when all was still not right...

So, when it is still dark, in your life, when clarity, or wholeness, or healing has not yet arrived; when the unknown still lingers and hovers around you... maybe haunting/ maybe promising... what is your posture in waiting? Where do you go, physically, or metaphorically- for relief, for assurance, for renewed energy and confidence, for peace?

In some measure, however you choose to define it, you go to your place of prayer. As Richard Rohr says, when you pray, you 'reposition yourself'; you take off your thinking cap, and you 'think without thinking'... You allow yourself to see beyond the immediate, through a larger lens than the everyday. As he craftily says, "most people do not see things as they *are*, rather, they see things as *they* are."

So, prayer, rightly done, requires a skill to be able to 'let Go and let God', as they say; to let the compass of God's all-embracing love do its necessary work in you, whatever that may be. For the truth, in the end, and in the beginning, too- is that God's love wins out. It was because of God's love that all creation came into being, and it will be God's love that consummates all creation in a glorious symphony of whatever the end may be...

Rohr doesn't elaborate on this, but I think he should be more upfront about the state in which people are in when he's writing about prayer, particularly in reference to those "Breathing Underwater", those who have the odds stacked up against them in their particular life circumstances.

For just as Jesus was driven to 'alone time', to have his batteries recharged in communion with God, so it is that those dealing with alcoholism, be it 2 months or twenty years in to it, as well as with other debilitating illnesses, one can recognize in those very moments, in wrestling with those demons, that is the right time to be seeking, praying, hoping and experiencing that of God within.

It is in the midst of the wilderness that God arrives.

The fact is that it is in the midst of dealing with sickness that healing most effectively begins to arrive.

In the words of Michael Lerner, a therapist who works with cancer patients, he offers a helpful prescription for us from what he would do if he, himself was diagnosed with cancer (and you can translate this to any illness you might choose, including alcoholism.)

He writes: "I would pay a great deal of attention to the inner healing process that I hoped a cancer diagnosis would trigger in me... I would give very careful thought to the meaning of my life, what I wanted to let go of, and what I wanted to keep."

Healing is initiated in the sickness: it doesn't wait for the cure to arrive to begin its work. It is present already, unbidden but prepared and ready to be activated at just the right time.

What Michael Lerner does not elaborate on is exactly what he would let go of, and what he would keep. If I may, I'd like to make a few pertinent suggestions.

What is it that might top the list of those things we need to let go of? Maybe we could let go of our self-imposed need to prove our own worth, or status, or habits of over-indulgent self-love that tend to displace the pure and simple life-giving presence of God's love that permeates every square inch of this world we live in. Maybe, rather than relying on our to-do lists to justify how much we are needed by others, we can take some time, as Jesus did, to hold on to a simple awareness that God's love for us is already as steady and constant as the tides, day after day and night after night.

There is no harnessing it; there is no saving it for later... it comes steadily, non-stop, available to all equally and evenly. Maybe we can keep closer tabs on to those special moments of connection with God.

Admittedly, there are some places more conducive to communion with God than others, and, frankly- there are some times better than others for some of us, too. Though I can be a morning person, somehow late afternoon often seems like a better time for me to take in what has happened through the day; take a deep breath, appreciate it, and then be ready to move on...

Near the end of the chapter Richard Rohr quotes Paula D'Arcy, a writer, playwright and spiritual guide who had once worked with Dr. Norman Vincent Peale and now spends her time leading workshops and working with those in prison; citing perhaps her most famous written line: "God comes to us, disguised as our life."

If this is so, and I can't see why it's not... perhaps this 11<sup>th</sup> Step is the most crucial one so far... There is plenty of literature available out there about what is often termed a neglected second stage of life; a solo journey into our own hearts – a descent toward authenticity, toward soul, to reclaim what is the "core" or "basic character of our being," our individual, spiritual DNA.

If God is disguised in the morning stillness, or even in the beginnings of a sunset, we'd best pay close attention.

And if we keep our hearts and eyes open, we will see something to inspire us. And in that inspiration, maybe we'll be able to have that make a difference for us and then someone else...

In Jesus' name, may we be able to do this, each and every day. Amen.