

Epiphany 5, Year B  
Mark 1: 29-39  
February 8, 2009

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, California

Taking Time:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

To this day, I remember my first day of teaching—almost thirty-six years ago—a lecture to two hundred seniors. The adrenalin rush. The fear. The exhilaration. The awesome responsibility of it all. And the letdown afterwards. How hard it was to walk out of that classroom. How hard to step back into ordinary life. How strong the lure to preserve the moment.

I wonder how it was for Jesus in the early days of *his* ministry. Do you think he, too, felt the rush? Do you think he, too, felt the fear? Do you think he struggled with the down time? Do you think he wanted to preserve the moment? I wonder. I wonder what it was like for him as he launched into his ministry.

Think of it—the rapid-fire way his ministry begins. Baptized by John, he hears God say, “You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.” And then he’s whisked away to the wilderness where he finds himself tempted by Satan and ministered to by angels. Not long thereafter he’s on the shores of Galilee calling disciples and beginning to spread the word of the reign of God. Then he’s teaching in the synagogue, healing folks plagued with demons, generating crowds that would make a politician green with envy. Barely time to breathe, barely time to think, barely time to take it all in.

No wonder he takes a break. No wonder he steals off to Simon Peter’s house. But even there crowds follow him. Even there challenges confront him. Simon Peter’s mother-in-law bedded by a fever. What can he do—heal her of course. It’s the least that he can do. Others also clamor for a cure. They’re hurting too. Mark tells us the whole city gathered at the door. All crying out for help. All deep in need. What could he do but lend a healing hand.

Wiped out, he turns from the door and falls into his bed. No wonder. He’s drained. He’s spent. He needs a good night’s sleep. But still the pressure mounts. The crowds still hover in the yard. How tempting it must have been to rest until the dawn and then resume the work of healing. How tempting it must have been to yield to the pressures of the moment. Yet that’s not what he does.

Mark tells us Jesus steals away long before the break of dawn. Mark tells us he goes out to a deserted place and prays.

Think of it. How remarkable it is. Jesus doesn’t dive right in to the work of healing. Jesus doesn’t yield to the pressures of the moment. He takes a different path. Long before dawn he awakens—not to get a start on the work but to take off time to pray and get grounded for the work ahead.

As I reflect on the pressures of our times—both those we experience in our private lives and those that mark our public lives in church and country—I’m struck by the urgency of it all. The pressure for quick fixes. The pressing needs knocking at the door. No wonder we find ourselves engaged in a flurry of activities. “Do something. Now.” And yet, I wonder. Is a flurry of activity the way to go? Is action the first step that we should take?

That's not the Gospel way. Look again at what Jesus does. Time and again throughout his ministry. He steals off to pray, to get connected, to get grounded in his relationship with God and then, and only then, he goes about the work of spreading the reign of God.

So many times we find ourselves engaged in a flurry of activity—at least that's true of me and I suspect it's true of you as well. So often when confronted with a problem, I'm tempted get busy. Really busy. For years, I thought that's just what folks do. That's what I ought to do. Get busy. Find a solution. Now. You know the cliches that govern times like these: Don't let grass grow under your feet. Make hay while the sun shines.

But then my mother took sick. I hurried home. I got on the phone. Scheduling folks to bring her dinner. That's what she needed. Thirty days of dinners. I worked so hard. I was really busy. In eighteen hours I had scheduled thirty meals. All delivered by different friends. Though she was weak and tired, I roused her from her sleep and gave her the good news. Thirty dinners. Thirty days. "For me?" she asked and fell back into sleep. Three hours later she was actively dying. Time stood still. We sat with one another. Stroking hair and holding hands and savoring the silence that we shared. One last laugh together and then she died.

As I look back upon that week and that frenzy of activity, I find myself wondering why—why spend my time on the phone when I could have sat with Mom. Was busyness a way of keeping the wolf far from the door? A way of distracting me from the pressures at hand? A way of holding onto the illusion that I was in control? I wonder.

You and I we find ourselves living in trying times. Unsettling times. Anxious times. In times like these it's tempting to hold on to old navigating systems—the tried and true—or so we think. Activity. Lots of it. That's what we need. Get busy. Find a solution. Now.

But that's not the Gospel way. That's not the way that Jesus follows. That's not the way he calls us to. That's not what we're about.

Remember what Jesus did his second day of ministry in Capernaum. "Early in the morning, while it was very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."

Prayer. That's our first step. Not drafting plans. Not doing things. Not even making lists or calling folks. Our first step is prayer—a step into stillness, a step into silence. Into deep listening to the God who created us and calls us into being. Our first step is a step into the waiting place we call prayer.

Remember the words of the prophet:

But those who wait for God will renew their strength.  
They shall mount up like eagles  
They shall run and not be weary  
They shall walk and not faint.

Our times cry out for waiting—waiting for God.

Our times cry out for prayer.

Remember, those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength. What are **we** waiting for?