

**5th SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY**  
**February 7, 2021**

Text: Mark 1:29-39

Theme: There He Prayed

Grace and peace to you from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

When we reach the point of *herd immunity* we will be able to resume our normal activities. Anyway that is what we are being told. But before we get too excited we would be wise to remember what those normal days looked like. Even in a pandemic many of us still get up early in the morning and we do not take a break or stop until well into the night. Before we fall asleep we make a list of all the things that we did not accomplish from the day now gone and we add everything that will need to be done tomorrow. We should be prepared because once all the restrictions that have been in place for the last ten months are finally lifted our lists of things to do will grow exponentially.

Simon and Andrew, James and John must have been wondering what they got themselves into after their first full day with Jesus. As fishermen they were used to long hours but in the comfort of their boats alongside the quiet sea. Now (in one day) Jesus took them to the city of Capernaum and straight to the synagogue where he taught. While in the synagogue he cast out a demon. From there they stopped by the house of Simon where Jesus healed his mother-in-law. Once restored to health she started to serve them (perhaps a good home-cooked meal). By the end of the day the whole city had gathered around their house. Seeing them Jesus went among the people to heal them of their diseases and/or to cast out demons from their spirits.

It was a long day for Jesus. By the time he went to bed he must have been exhausted. He healed many that day and he knew there would be more coming in the morning. He needed his rest.

As Jesus prepared himself for another day of ministry we are told that he got up early in the morning (while it was still dark) and went to a deserted place to pray. Already he is giving us an example to follow. How many of us step out of bed and hit the ground running?

In the *Gospel of Mark* we find Jesus going off to be alone in prayer three different times. We have our story for today. In Mark 6 we hear that Jesus sent his disciples off in a boat so he could spend the night in prayer after he fed over five thousand people. Then in Mark 14 Jesus prayed with fervor in the Garden of Gethsemane.

For Mark these were all pivotal moments in his retelling of the story. And they all share one common element (darkness). It was in the dark that Jesus went to uninhabited and lonely places to be quiet with God (to be still with God). As a church we put so much emphasis on light that we forget that God also gives value to the darkness. So my big discovery this week will warm the hearts of all of you who love to garden. I stumbled across the word *photoperiodism* which is a term that describes how some plants (known as long-night or short-day plants) optimize their ability to grow and flower based on the amount of time they spend in the dark.

When we use that as a metaphor for prayer we discover that the time we spend in the darkness with God (before the day even starts to take over our lives) will optimize our ability to grow in faith. How many of us have a space reserved in our homes for prayer that offers us solitude and even darkness? On Ash Wednesday (just ten days from now) we will read the lesson from Matthew 6 that reads: But whenever you pray, go into your room, and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.

A member of a church in Texas took that verse literally. She was an older woman who lived alone in a small one-bedroom house just up the street from the church. When the pastor visited her at home for the first time she insisted on showing him every nook and cranny. She had designed the house herself and had it built and she was proud of the results.

The bedroom was in the back and it had a walk-in closet. As she opened the door to the closet the pastor noticed how small it was and that it had a little bench in the middle. Her clothes hung on either side. On the bench was an old-tattered Bible. She told the pastor that this was her prayer closet. She read in Scripture that when we pray we were to go into a room and shut the door. So that was how she designed the room. To do exactly what the Bible said she made sure there was a door leading into it.

She read the Bible with the door open and then shut it to sit and pray. It was her deserted place – the one place she knew she could go to get away from the clamor of the world and be refreshed and renewed in the Spirit.

In our lesson we are encouraged to reserve a space where we can spend some alone time with God. Some of us may already have such a place but (if not) it is always a good time to make one. It does not have to be a closet but it that works for you then go for it. It can be as simple as a favorite chair or even someplace outside of our homes. It is where we feel comfortable reading our Bibles and spending time in conversation with God. It is where we can retreat each day from the pressures of the day and be with God.

During this pandemic we have fewer spaces accessible to us. If our houses are full of people (and those people are with us 24/7) it can be a challenge. Even those of us who are single might need to be a bit more creative to find a place where we are fully removed from the obligations that take up most of the time that we are awake. And that leads us to the second consideration. We addressed the question of *where* to pray and still need to think about *when* we are to pray . . . especially since our schedules are already booked from the time we get up until well into the night. It seems likely that adding any significant time to our schedules for prayer would only cause us more stress.

Of Martin Luther it is written that during the times when he struggled the most he did not pass a day without devoting three hours at least to prayer. In the privacy of his chamber he was heard to pour out his soul before God in words full of adoration, fear, and hope, as when one speaks to a friend.

In our prayer group we just talked about this very thing. We are to invite God to impose on our tightly ordered lives and seek out his company. If we want to be fluent in prayer then we must set aside time knowing that we may have to give up something else in the process. If we want to pray better than we need to pray more. When we pray consistently we are able to meet the challenges and temptations of the day. Prayer brings the stuff of the world before God and God gives us a new perspective to take back to the world.

Reserve that deserted place (just for you) and then when your alarm goes off you can hit the ground running by first dedicating some time to pray. You can map out the day with God (not apart from him) and ask for the openness to accept whatever the next few hours may bring. And (like Jesus) all those in your house will eventually search for you and find you. By then you will be ready to start the day fresh. Amen