February 8, 2015
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

I don’t know about you, but our hearing of Mark’s Gospel these last three weeks has left me exhausted! We haven’t even finished the first chapter, and Jesus has already done the following:

- He’s made a long journey to find John and submitted to John’s baptism
- He has spent 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and facing temptation
- He has called four fishermen
- Cast out a demon
- Healed St. Peter’s mother-in-law and countless others in Capernaum
- And, kept his team together while staying totally focused on his mission

That’s quite an itinerary and we still have another lesson next week before we leave chapter 1! If you feel a bit weary from the reading and hearing of these lessons, imagine how our Lord felt.

So we read, “In the morning, while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” The person we have come to know as “Son of God”, “Messiah”, and “Holy One” is fully human even as he is fully divine. Our Lord’s humanity, however, knows every aspect of our humanity. He knows temptation and has experienced criticism. He experiences thirst and hunger. He walks our walk and uses the language of his time and finds his feet firmly planted on that Galilean soil.

And . . . he knew the experience we all know: physical, bone-weary exhaustion. There is no question why our Lord came early on to this place of physical depletion. From the moment he came out of Jordan’s muddy river, dripping with baptismal waters, he moved with purposeful conviction to engage the ministry of preaching and sharing good news. The crowds have now gone home. He has found a place to lay his head and get a good night’s sleep. Having rested soundly, he rises long before daybreak, to find what Mark calls “a deserted place” to pray.

At some point in life’s journey, for some more often than others, we come to a moment when we simply cannot go on. Energy leaves us. Imagination disappears. Vitality vanishes. Smiles morph into frowns. We shut out the people who love us most and toss and turn in our loneliness as fatigue pitches its tent in our souls. Researchers tell us that one of the top culprits causing all manner of health issues is lack of sleep. Makes sense to me that we need sleep… 7 or 8 hours – we’re working hard juggling family and career, the demands of children on one side and aging parents on the other – but we simply wake up more exhausted than when we turned in the night before.

Is there good news for the weary? Might our scriptures be revealing a cure for exhaustion? I think it’s here if we will catch our breath, lean in to the story, and listen to Jesus. Hear Mark’s comment one more time: “In the morning, while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” I sense God saying to us in this verse that a cure for exhaustion requires a commitment to rest. I’m told there is a difference between “sleep” and “rest”. Last year, I did a sleep test. Afterward the technician that was monitoring me said: “I almost called the rescue squad three times. You stopped breathing an average of 87 times an hour! (Obviously I got a CPAP machine, and now I rest much better… and my blood pressure dropped as well!) Our tossing in the night and outright insomnia are telling us we are not experiencing rest.

Though I am not a sleep specialist by any definition, I see in the Gospel a formula for rest we would do well to heed. Simply put, Mark tells us Jesus focused his life on what he believed was his mission. He dove into the deep end of that mission teaching, healing, casting out demons, and calling
common people to follow him. Because he knew who he was and was focused on what only he could do, we laid his head down to rest letting go of everything that wasn’t important, entrusting his life to God.

The story is told of a bishop who, feeling the burdens of the diocese simply could not sleep. Finally, God spoke to him. “You’ve wrestled with these matters long enough. Go to sleep and I’ll handle things from here.” The most important step in experiencing a cure for exhaustion is to move to the place of rest …releasing into God’s care your weary life. Jesus did that. We would be wise to learn from his example.

What follows is finding a place free of noise, people, expectations, demands, and things. Jesus, according to Mark, found “a deserted place”. The word translated “deserted” is the noun for “desert” or “wilderness”. There are few desolate places on planet earth quite like the desert places in the Middle East. In those places, there is no water, no vegetation, no life – only solitude. Jesus found a place he could be alone and keep his own counsel.

We will never find a cure for our exhausted lives until we find our own desert place. It may be a room in your home. It could be a city park or a quite corner of a coffee house (Probably not a Starbucks!). It must be a place where no iPad, no iPhone, no laptop, no friends dropping by, no Day-Timer open, and no life-noise (music, words, traffic if possible) can enter. In such a place, we have the invitation both to reconnect with God from deep within in our souls and rekindle our spirit to create open spaces for God’s Spirit: new thoughts, comforting silence, and noiseless but nourishing love. Find that place and find it soon!

Releasing our cares to God, finding that quite, noiseless place, now leads to an invitation to pray. More than words – but sometimes using words – prayer is soul-to-soul, life-to-life communion with God. The good news our lesson shows us is our Lord – Son of God, Holy One of God, Messiah – rooted his life in prayer. If Jesus needed to pray, we must pray! In prayer, God reminds us who we are and who God is. Prayer creates a space where we can let go of all that wearies us and take hold of the only One who can sustain us. And therein is the cure for our exhausted, depleted, tired lives.

Are you exhausted? Something tells me we all are from time to time; some of us most of the time. Hear and believe the good news. In our relationship to Jesus Christ, there is a cure for exhaustion born of God’s love and centered in the life of faith. Choose life. Choose rest. Choose to live the good news that you can be made new through God’s good work in your life.