

Sermon: "Prayer in the Wilderness"
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DANGER!

What is the most dangerous thing you do each week?
What's that? You don't do anything dangerous? I bade to disagree

I know that many of you do something dangerous each and every day. You take to the roads of Central Florida in your cars. That is a very dangerous thing to do. If you don't believe me, believe my insurance company. When I moved to this area my rates almost doubled. Driving is a very dangerous activity in this part of the world.

I think of the line that Dave Barry uses when he talks about driving in Miami. He says that it's a place where everyone drives according to the rules of his or her country of origin! I sometimes wonder if that doesn't describe Central Florida as well.

But, as dangerous as it is, driving is not the most dangerous thing that many of us do. I would contend that the most dangerous thing we ever do is pray.

Now I know. If we were to do a top ten list of the most dangerous things a person might do, prayer would not be on most of our lists. Skydiving, bungee jumping and automobile racing maybe ... but prayer?

Who are you kidding? What's so dangerous about prayer? Everyone can pray ... even people who can do nothing else can pray. There have even been studies that prayer is beneficial from a medical standpoint.

How could I ever get the idea that prayer is dangerous? Didn't I say last week that an experience of God's presence is to be desired above all things? Isn't it the presence of God in Jesus Christ that enables us to have the good life and take away the problems that beset us?

Not exactly.

THE SIMPSONS

In a recent episode of the cartoon show, the Simpsons, Homer decides that God has nothing better to do than answer all of his petty requests. In one scene Homer is on the floor praying to the find the remote control to the TV, and voila ... he finds it under the couch.

You can see where they are going with this. Homer continues to pray for the most mundane of things whatever he may want at the moment. His "prayer life" continues in this vein until his exasperated and long suffering wife, Marge says,

"Homer, God is not the great concierge in the sky. He's the Lord!"

I couldn't have said it better myself Marge. God is the Lord. God is the Creator, the King of the Universe, the Almighty. God is not our personal servant. God is the Holy One of Israel ... the Ancient of Days in addition to being our friend, our companion and our guide.

We need to emphasize the holiness and the love of God if we are to have a right view of prayer. God is both loving and just. And there must be a balance in our prayer life that reflects this awareness.

We need to remember that God not only cares for our needs but also calls us to go where there is need. God not only heals our pain and suffering but also calls us to voluntarily suffer for others in the name of Christ.

As someone once put it, God not only comforts the afflicted but also afflicts the comfortable! Prayer can work both ways. And that is why prayer can be a very dangerous exercise. Truly seeking the presence of God can really "mess up" our world!

A DISTURBING PRESENCE

Why do you think the children of Israel dreaded seeing the reflected glory of God in the face of Moses after he spoke with God on the mountain? It was because the presence of God even when it was just reflected in the face of another is often too great and terrible to bear. The presence of God sometimes bids us to go where we do not want to go and say what we do not want to say.

Several weeks ago we talked about the prophet Jonah who was called to bring God's message to the Assyrians at Nineveh. The Assyrians were Jonah's enemies and Jonah didn't want to bring them any message.

God's call and God's presence was not a happy thing for Jonah. Indeed Jonah sought to run away from God but to no avail. God's presence and God's call are too big to ignore. No matter where we go God is still there challenging us to confront evil with God's grace and truth.

And yet, despite the fact that this second aspect of prayer and God's call is plainly taught throughout the Bible, we try to turn prayer into some inane self-help exercise. Often, we really do seem think that God is our own great concierge in the sky.

Even our favorite songs about prayer reflect this emphasis. We sing "Sweet Hour of Prayer," and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." We think of prayer as a quiet peaceful time when all the cares of the world fade away. In fact, some of us even talk about having a "quiet time" when it's just us and the Lord.

Now there's nothing wrong with any of that. I certainly wouldn't want us to quit singing those songs or having a quiet time with the Lord. God does promise to give us comfort and strength in our time of need.

That's just not the whole story. When we seek God's presence in prayer, we must realize that we live in a world that is filled with what God does not want, and it just might be possible that God wants us to change some of those things. Indeed, there are some things in our personal life that God probably wants to change as well.

So it stands to reason that the presence of God should bring us discomfort as well as comfort. Indeed we read in the book of Proverbs,

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." Proverbs 9:10 (NRSV)

The awesome presence of God always calls us to be more and do more.
The presence of God always calls us to go to a greater place.

Just as the presence of God led his people out of captivity in Egypt to the promised land, so the presence of God leads us out of captivity to those things and forces that imprison us. We too are called to look for the promised land, a land flowing not only with "milk and honey" but also with God's truth and justice.

It is not easy to go on such a journey, but it is the journey to which we are called by the power of prayer.

PRAYER AFTER A LONG DAY

In our lesson from the gospel of Mark, we are given an example of how this dangerous side of prayer works.

Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus went and prayed. When we read Mark's breathless account of a typical day of ministry in the life of Jesus, we can certainly understand his need to "get away from it all." According to Mark, in one day he healed a man possessed by an evil spirit, healed Peter's mother in law, and then the whole town beat a path to his door.

In fact, Jesus was so popular that people were still coming to the home where he was when the sun was going down. Can you imagine the scene? There is a crowd of people ... some with physical illness, some with mental illness all of them wanting to see Jesus. So Jesus healed many of them.

If we believe that Jesus was fully human as well as being fully divine, we can certainly infer that this mass of needy humanity took its toll. Many of us know what it is to give and give and give until we come to a point where there is nothing left to give. So Jesus felt the need to refocus and refresh ... he sought out a lonely place where he could pray.

PRAYER IN THE WILDERNESS

But, we shouldn't think that the lonely place was place of retreat and comfort. The Greek word is properly translated as "a deserted place" by the NRSV. We're not talking about some quiet walk in the woods or the calm serenity of a sunrise viewed from a mountaintop in this passage.

The Greek word, eiramos refers to a desolate place, a place that is devoid of all life, a desert, a place where there are many dangers to body and soul. When Isaiah prophesied that enemies of God's people, Babylon and Edom would be destroyed, he said that the demons of the eiramos, the demons of the desert or wilderness would take possession of these deserted cities. This word also seems to be a metaphor throughout the Bible for spiritual dryness as well. This is the place where hard choices have to be made.

It was in the wilderness that God's people were called upon to make their choice between following God's ways or going their own way.

CHOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

In the book of Deuteronomy the law of God was very carefully spelled out for the Israelites, and before they could enter the promised land, God's people had to make a choice. They had to choose God's way and a life of blessing or the way of other "gods" and the curses that would automatically follow such a choice.

To dramatize that choice, Joshua later renewed the covenant by following precisely the ceremony prescribed by Moses. (Joshua 8:30-35) Two mountains that formed a kind of natural gateway to the promised land were used as an object lesson.

One group stood on the slope of Mount Gerizim and were symbolic of the blessings that would come to those who followed the law of God. Another group stood on the slope of Mount Ebal on the other side, and symbolized the curses that would befall those who broke God's law and chose to become a part of a pagan culture. In the valley below was the ark with the priests and the Levites.

With the people arranged in this dramatic fashion, Joshua proceeded to read the blessings and the curses of the law ... probably with the people responding appropriately.

This is very dramatic. At the gateway to the desert and the promised land, the choice is clear. There is a topographical picture of the choice that God has set before God's people.

You can choose to follow God's law and enter the blessedness of the promised land or you could choose another way and remain in the despair and loneliness of the desert.

I believe this story from the Old Testament provides the background for much of the action that occurs in the wilderness or the deserted place in the New Testament.

As in the Old Testament, the wilderness is still a place where the kingdom of God begins and a place where important, hard choices have to be made.

WILDERNESS IN MARK

Let's review the events in Mark's gospel that lead up to our lesson for today.

John the Baptist fills the air with his calls for repentance. His call to choose the right way comes in the wilderness. He fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah. He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, and it is in the wilderness that He is tempted by the devil. Once again the big choice between good and evil are made in this lonely, deserted place.

And then we come to our lesson for today, Jesus, after a tiring day of work, rises early in the morning to go to the wilderness to pray.

It seems to me that the lonely place of prayer, the wilderness is not a quiet place where jangled nerves are soothed. The wilderness is a place of great anguish and struggle. It is not a mountaintop experience. It is more akin to standing on the edge of a dangerous cliff. Be careful what you do next in the wilderness. Choices in the wilderness are very important.

A CHOICE AND A TEMPTATION

I think that is why Jesus was in the wilderness before dawn that day. He had a choice to make and another temptation to face. The choice? What next? What should his next move be? There were more people to be healed. Perhaps he should stay in a familiar place and do what people wanted him to do. Or perhaps he should move on and proclaim the kingdom in another place as he felt he was called to do.

That was the choice.

The Scripture tells us that Simon Peter and his companions went looking for Jesus in this deserted place and when they found him they exclaimed, "Everyone is looking for you."

And that's the temptation. It is the temptation of success.

In effect they were saying to Jesus,
"Everyone in Capernaum is looking for you. You're a hometown hero. You've healed their sick and cure the demon possessed. They like you're preaching. People love and admire you. Come back. Let your ministry end where it began. Become Capernaum's local wonder worker. Let's build upon the success we've experienced here."

For Jesus the choice was clear. One path led to Capernaum and a life of comfortable popularity. One path led to Golgotha and a costly sacrifice. One path led to a place where everyone was shouting "Hosanna." The other path led to a place where they would all cry "crucify him."

But, the latter path represented the will of God. The plans of God were greater than success in just one place. There was a message to be carried to a wider world.

OUR TEMPTATION

Quite frankly, I would prefer to think of prayer as a kind of sweet retreat from the cares of the world and sometimes it is just that. But, at other times ... when I truly listen for God's voice in my prayers .. it is the time of great decision .. a time to struggle with where I am and where God wants me to go. It is prayer in the wilderness.

It is so tempting to think that large numbers of "satisfied customers" and great programs make a successful church. But, Jesus' reply to his disciples reminds us that even "success" can be a temptation ... indeed success can be the greatest temptation of all.

We begin to think that if people speak well of us that what we are doing has to be the will of God. And that's not necessarily so.
Sometimes ... quite often in fact.... just the opposite is true.

I knew of a minister who was very successful at least on the outside. The congregation he served grew ... by leaps and bounds. They built several new buildings and added staff. People couldn't say enough good things about their pastor. After all, his ministry had made their church a success.

But, then this same pastor decided that God was calling him to work elsewhere ... in a small church in the country. And so he submitted his resignation. The people were flabbergasted by his decision. There was so much left to do ... programs to create ... buildings to build. How could he leave them at such a crucial time? Why was he going to such a small, isolated church where his talents would be wasted?

And then they said some things about their pastor that were not so nice.
In just a few days he had gone from hero to goat.
He had gone from the promised land to the wilderness of decision.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S CHALLENGE

We have to avoid the subtle temptation of thinking that "success" (however success is defined) means that God is on our side, that we are doing God's will, that we just have to do more of what we are already doing. That leads to self satisfaction and stagnation.

I think that being a follower of Christ is much more than just trying to make ourselves into a sanctified success as the world defines it. That is the subtle temptation into which all of us fall from time to time. We would rather hear the words of the disciples, "Everyone is searching for you."

But, perhaps we need to hear the words of Jesus to his disciples,
"There are many places that need the healing, redeeming word that I come to bring.
We need to move on."

I think that one reason many of us are unable to move on down the road with Jesus is because we are unable to get beyond what is comfortable and familiar. We can't imagine doing things differently.

There is a kind of spiritual sluggishness that often invades our life. And what we need to escape that sluggish period is not a word of comfort but a word of challenge.

That's what makes prayer so dangerous. God loves us enough to challenge us as well as bring us comfort. God loves us enough to drive us into the wilderness to pray. God loves us enough to require us to make the hard choices.

BAD LUCK?

An elderly man who was quite ill said to his wife, "You know, Sarah, you've always been with me – through the good and the bad.

Like the time I lost my job – you were right there by my side. And when the war came and I enlisted – you became a nurse so that you could be with me. Then I was wounded and you were there, Sarah, right by my side. Then the Depression hit and we had nothing – but you were there with me.

And now here I am, sick as a dog, and, as always, you're right beside me."

You know something, Sarah, you're bad luck!"

There are some people who seem to think about God the same way that this elderly man thought about his wife. If God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want Him to right away, then God's not fulfilling what we think His role in our life should be, namely, making our road in life smooth and easy.

But, maybe God fulfills a different role in our life. Maybe God is right there by our side in good times and in bad offering a word of encouragement and offering a word of challenge as well.

It is a dangerous thing to follow the call of God into the wilderness.

But, is a far greater danger to allow ourselves to become stagnant in the old ways to the point that we can no longer hear God's voice.

Friends, dare to do something dangerous this week.

Be willing to go where God calls you. Dare to hear God's challenging word as well as His comforting word. Dare to pray in the wilderness.

Amen.