

Sunday, July 22 and Wednesday, July 25 + 9th week after Pentecost
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56: "Into the Desert"

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In a culture where bigger is usually presumed to be better, it might seem challenging to make a strong case for a small- to medium-size church such as Holy Trinity. But in a typical megachurch experience, you're an onlooker, entertained by the music and perhaps inspired by the message, but it's all about you. You probably get little sense of the mission and purpose of the gathered assembly. It's usually about you and how you should turn your life around.

But we who are gathered here as a tangible community, we who are woven together by our regular presence here and the ability to see, touch, and get to know each other, we can develop together an awareness of the church's true purpose on earth, which is: to witness as a body to God's inbreaking kingdom, one ruled by love and life, not hatred and death. *The church is the people set apart for the sake of witnessing to God's kingdom.*

This doesn't just happen automatically, or even by hearing God's Word read aloud each week. To be such witnesses involves the cultivation of the spirit within each of us, so that everything we do is grounded in the experience of God. Otherwise we will be a

noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, in the words of the Apostle Paul, individually and together. For the church, our church, to be a witness to the new life proclaimed by Jesus Christ means that we each must attend to our souls, and to our spiritual needs, so that all the dimensions of our work in the world come from that deep place where the human and the divine intersect. But how do we do that?

Jesus tells us in the Mark reading: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Jesus is talking to the disciples, but he is also talking to us. Let’s look at the context in which Jesus extends this invitation.

Not long before, Jesus sent his disciples out into the world for the first time. Remember from two weeks ago, when Jesus gave them authority over the spirits and told them then, “If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So the disciples went out, casting out many demons and curing those who were ill.

What a heady experience that must have been! Now they have returned, and they are eager to tell their master everything that they did. They are probably interrupting each other in all their excitement. We can imagine Jesus listening patiently until each story is told. The disciples are exhausted, drained, but they don’t know it yet because the adrenalin is still flowing. Plus there is a lot of commotion all around, because the crowds who were following Jesus everywhere had caught sight of them.

“For many were coming and going,” Mark tells us, “and [the disciples] had no leisure even to eat.”

So Jesus invites them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Go to the desert in the midst of our busy lives, Jesus is telling us, to reconnect with our soul—that part of us that is the very center of our being, where divine and human intersect.

But how? How do we pause the steam engine of our busy-ness, to meditate—to ponder—to wonder—to pay attention? How do we escape the noise of our cellphones and the demands of our schedules, some of which are self-imposed, those things we think we *should* be doing?

Simply: Pray. Talk with God in whatever way feels natural to you. Prayer is stepping out of your busy-ness and into the movement of God to humanity and humanity to God, a rhythm of encounter and response. It is a living encounter with a living God, a way of being in which we have a constant wakefulness to the reality and presence of God. To develop a continuous awareness of the presence of God requires discipline, engaging in it mindfully for a time as you cultivate a life in which all becomes prayer.

What does this have to do with the church as witness to God’s kingdom?

The God of Christianity is an involved God. God is not up there, alone and apart, but is involved in humanity. So Christian prayer is also an involvement in humanity. And the desert, to which Jesus invites us, is not so much a place but a more of a corridor that

takes us in and out the church's mission to work for justice in the world. Going into and out of the desert helps re-collect ourselves as people within whom the living Christ abides.

These desert times help us to see the world around us more clearly. Those who society has pushed to the margins move to the center of our viewfinder. We see those who are sick, those who are homeless, and those who are being slowly crushed under the weight of a system that makes life easier for the rich and harder for the poor. We see children unloved and abandoned. We see refugees who flee the specter of death only to meet a fate almost worse than death, in which their children are ripped from their arms.

With this clear sight, each of us individually and the church as a body can discern how *our* hands and hearts may best be put to use for Jesus' work of breaking down walls that separate and divide, so that all people and things may be restored into communion with each other. We must ask ourselves: How can we best serve God in this community, at this particular time?

So, go with Jesus into the desert to meditate, to ponder, to wonder, to pay attention, to pray. Emerge not only with a sense of renewed engagement with the world around us, but with a heightened ability to be Christ to others. With all the emphasis today on healthy eating, we know a lot about being attentive to the nourishment of our

bodies. Now let's take a cue from Jesus and cultivate an attentiveness to the needs of our souls.