



LET US GO ON...

February 4, 2018, The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:29-39

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In the teen movie from the 1980s, “Ferris Buehler’s Day Off,” the titular character, full of smug charm announces to the camera, “Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop to look around once in a while, you could miss it.” In the gospel of Mark, Jesus moves pretty fast. The word “immediately” provides a steady drumbeat to the narrative. It is used more often in Mark than the rest of the books of the New Testament combined. This morning’s text opens with an “As soon as” which in the original Greek is literally “immediately.” Jesus and his disciples careen quickly from a healing in the synagogue to a healing in the house of Simon and Andrew. Reading the Gospel of Mark can leave you breathless with the urgency in which it presents every step of Jesus’ life. Today is the first in a sermon series, *God on the Move*, in the Gospel of Mark. Over the next three weeks we will consider what this portrayal of God in motion has to teach us about how to be faithful.

Much of the drama of this text is in the bright lights of Jesus healing Simon’s mother-in-law and then countless others as we are told “the whole city was gathered around the door.” There is plenty of rich sermon material to be found there but today we are turning toward what comes next. After that day of intense activity and excitement, “In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”

In the aftermath of a day of remarkable success when he had brought restoration to so many; a day when an entire city clamored to be in his presence, Jesus is gone before the dawn. Most likely he was on his way out of town sometime between 3 and 6 in the morning. He went to pray in the middle of nowhere. The confused



disciples awake, prepared for another day of high profile healing in this city where he has quickly become a rock star. But there is no Jesus to be found. They anxiously and earnestly search for him, until they find him in the most unlikely of places, quiet and alone. They are prepared to whisk him back to the adoring crowds. But that is not Jesus' agenda. Jesus does not choose to remain in one place. There will be no basking in the success of what has come before. Jesus is in motion, relentlessly forward in all sorts of ways.

The disciples may not understand it; in fact I guarantee you they did not understand it. But if they wish to be with Jesus they have no choice but to be in motion as well. Throughout the entire gospel the disciples are ever struggling to keep up with Jesus. Even after his death this is so. In the final chapter, after Jesus has died and is buried, the women rise very early in the morning, a variation on Jesus' departure in our text, and when they get to the tomb, the stone has been rolled away and he is already gone. A man in white is there to greet them. He tells them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee: there you will see him, just as he told you." We are told the women fled in terror and amazement. And how could they not? There was no possible way to be prepared for such earth-shattering news. But, as readers of the gospel of Mark, we should not be all that surprised. Jesus never stays in any one place for very long. Even the bonds of death will not keep him from moving forward.

I suppose on one level all this talk of God on the move is exciting and energizing. But, it worries me. I am a creature of routine. Get up at 6 AM, workout and prayers. In the office at 7:30 with an apple for breakfast and a book to read. Letting the day unfold with a planned to-do list and schedule. That is my kind of day.

Correspondingly, I would prefer a God that kept a reasonable and predictable schedule; a God that you could know where to find at all times. Would that really be too much to ask?



I have no idea whether or not that is too much to ask. But what I do know, what all of us know, is that is not how God is at work in the world. We know what it is to be like those disciples. To wake up in the morning and expect God to be in one place only to find that God has set out for someplace else. We find ourselves in this frustrating situation where God's location in our lives is a mystery.

The writer Frederick Buechner wrote, "Man happens upon mystery as a summons to pilgrimage...where he is led to support the reality of splendors he cannot name."¹ Not being as erudite as Buechner, I would say, we are intrigued by hide and seek. It is one of the first games we can play with an infant. The sight of our face looking down on them might be mildly interesting, but the act of hiding and revealing our face behind our hands is a cause for utter delight.

Does God play hide and seek with us? I would have to say at times it certainly appears so. The Biblical text gives us the Book of Esther in which God never utters a peep or makes an appearance of any kind. Job suffers for a long time before he hears from the divine. And in all of our lives there are dry and dusty times when the presence of God's nourishing Spirit eludes us. Sometimes we slip into monotonous routines in which the general hectic pace of life leaves us with a missing and forgotten deity. At first we may not even notice. And then we pause for a moment and realize we have no sense that God is by our side. In other heartbreaking times we are desperate for a sign from God in our midst as we are pushed to the edge by some combination of tragedy before us and broken-ness within us. We cry out and can hear no response. We imploringly scan the skies and our surroundings in every direction and see nothing that resembles God's presence.

Is God jumping up and down right in front of us and calling our names? Is it we who just cannot open our eyes and ears to recognize the divine in those moments? Or, has God scurried away to some remote corner of the universe giving us space for some divine reason? I don't know. What I believe is God is always present with us. I suppose the real question is why God can be so hard to recognize at



times. Would we dare to say that God is playing hide and seek with us merely as a ploy to get our attention?

No, I would not go that far. But I do think there is an inherent inevitability to the way in which our recognition of God in our midst comes and goes. The grammar of the Old Testament illuminates this. In the original Hebrew, God is the only character that acts in the present tense. All of humanity's actions grammatically occur in other tenses. This suggests that our mortal limitations prevent us from being fully present to the reality of how God is immediately at work among us.

In the New Testament, we also get a clue as to why God appears to play hide and seek with us. The actions in which Jesus engages are not just merely done for face value result. For instance, when Jesus heals a person, obviously it is his intention to provide relief from suffering for that individual, but that is not the only intent. My colleague in the Moveable Feast, Camille Cook Murray, describes it like this, "Jesus' work is always about more than the individual act. He is always travelling toward the larger redemptive and salvific narrative. His words, 'Let us go on...' point to his mindset of large-scale change, larger purpose with God's power, and connection to the divine narrative and the kingdom of God." In other words we cannot see the bigger picture. But God does indeed have one. It is impossible for us to envision how each of our lives is playing in to God's intentions for all of creation. All we can see is our own daily dramas, our own moments of heartbreak and joy, our own personal outcomes that define our mortal existence.

All those disciples could see was that Jesus was a smashing success where they were standing at the moment. People were being healed and the adoring crowds were intoxicating. What they could not see is that Jesus was not called to just one town, to just provide healing to just one group of people. Jesus was called to the world and all its people.

I am sure when those disciples woke up that morning they thought Jesus had lost his way. How could he abandon these people? How could he abandon them? I am sure they were equal parts angry and confused by all of it. But Jesus was not



abandoning them, he was fulfilling a vision larger than they could comprehend. I can only imagine how those women at the tomb felt when they discovered Jesus' body was gone. They too must have been angry and confused. But he had not abandoned them either; he had gone on to a purpose much larger than any of us can comprehend.

So when we feel as if God is playing hide and seek with us; when we feel as if God is always beyond our grasp, as if God has once again escaped to a place beyond where we know. The truth is that although those feelings are real, the underlying reality is that God is actually on the move before us in bigger and deeper ways than we can imagine. God's healing touch is always on the move before us. And although God's ways may be beyond our imagination, God's intentions for us remain steadfast and thankfully predictable, to provide healing and saving grace to every last one of us. So let us go on. God is ever before us, inviting us on this remarkable journey.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Buechner, Frederick, *The Alphabet of Grace*, The Seabury Press, New York, 1970, p. 75.