

Leaving Capernaum - Mark 1:35-39

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Our story today refers to a "solitary (or deserted) place". It got me wondering what is the most deserted or the remotest place on earth. Does anyone here know where the remotest place on earth is? It has been calculated to be the Tibetan Plateau (an elevated flat area). I found this interesting, in part because I spent eight months in Nepal, which is just south of the Tibetan Plateau. Here are a few interesting facts about the Tibetan Plateau: (1) The average elevation is close to 15,000 feet. That's higher than any mountain in our continental 48 states. It's no wonder that this plateau is sometimes called "the roof of the world". (2) This is the highest and biggest plateau in the world with an area about four times the size of Texas. (3) The annual precipitation ranges from 4 - 12 inches (which qualifies as a desert climate) and falls mainly as hailstorms. (4) Frost occurs for six months out of the year. Permafrost (ground that remains permanently frozen) occurs over extensive parts. (5) The north and northwest part of the plateau is the least populated region in Asia (because of the extremely inhospitable environment) and the third least populated area in the world after Antarctica and northern Greenland. And (6) it is a three-week trip to the nearest city - one day by car and the remaining 20 on foot. The rough terrain and the high altitude are what make this the most secluded place on earth.

Most of us will never be in a place this remote. In fact, we might have a hard time going anywhere where there is no one around or no distracting noises. In today's world you often have to be intentional if you want to spend time alone in a quiet place. And you have to be down-right determined if you're going to start your day alone praying to your Father in heaven. Well, Jesus is exactly that in our story today.

Our story comes from Mark 1:35-39. Here is a summary: *"Jesus got up very early in the morning to spend time praying in a solitary place. Later His disciples went looking for Him. Instead of returning to Capernaum, Jesus took His disciples throughout Galilee, preaching and casting out demons."*

Once again, Jesus is the main character in our story today. What did He experience in this story? First of all, He experienced a short night of sleep. He had been up late the night before healing "the whole city" of Capernaum, as Mark described it in verse 33 of this same chapter. He hadn't started healing until after sunset, so it must have been close to midnight by the time the last person was healed. Mark says Jesus got up "in the morning" This is a Greek word meaning "at dawn" referring to the last watch of the night or the "day-break watch" (the Romans divided the night into four watches, approximately three hours each). This watch was between the hours of 3:00 and 6:00 AM. Mark adds another description of the time of Jesus' awakening. He says it was "a long while before daylight". He may have included this detail in order to indicate that it was the early part of the watch. So, it may have been 3:00 in the morning when Jesus got up to pray.

This leads us into the second experience of Jesus in our story today: time alone in prayer. I don't know about you, but if I go to bed really late, it's going to take a lot to get me up really early. Jesus' actions here show intentionality and determination. There must have been an intense desire in His heart to spend an extended period of time in prayer before anyone else was awake. I don't think He had an alarm clock. And I don't think He had trouble sleeping. I believe it was the Spirit who woke Him up. Well, Mark says Jesus went to a "solitary place". This is the same word that is translated "wilderness". We learned about the wilderness a few weeks ago. It's an ideal place to go to be alone. Jesus went here because it was a place where He could think clearly. There were no distractions. Night wildlife may have made some noise, but I believe He felt at home with nature. And here He prays for probably several hours. We don't know what time the disciples woke up or how long it took them to find Him, but it certainly would have been well after sunrise by the time they found Him. It has been said that every great Christian leader has been a man of prayer. We might say that the amount of God's power we experience each day is in proportion to the amount of time we spend in prayer. Jesus was filled with the Spirit like no one else ever has, and He certainly spent a lot of time in prayer.

Third, Jesus experiences His Father's agenda. As a result of the time He spends in prayer, He receives a clear agenda from God. He knows what the plan is. In fact, He shares it with the disciples: "Let us go into the next

towns that I may preach there also." In other words, it's time to leave Capernaum. So, Jesus experienced clear direction from His Father as a result of the time He spent in prayer that morning. Last of all, Jesus experiences a consistent ministry. Mark says Jesus and His disciples went "throughout all Galilee". He highlights two aspects of Jesus' ministry. First of all, He says Jesus "was preaching in their synagogues". Jesus had been doing this repeatedly throughout the first chapter of Mark (vs. 14, 15; 21, 22). Mark also says Jesus was "casting out demons". Mark has already mentioned Jesus doing this in two other instances in this same chapter (Mark 1:21-28; 32-34). His ministry was consistent. It had a theme. He preached the gospel. He announced the good news that the Messiah had at last arrived to set up the kingdom of God in people's hearts. And wherever He met people who were demon possessed (which seems to have been pretty common in those days), He set them free. He commanded the demons to leave. He was destroying Satan's kingdom and setting up God's kingdom. This was a theme throughout His ministry.

So what about the disciples? What did they experience in our story today? First, they experienced Simon's leadership. From what we know, at this time there were only four disciples – Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, and John. Only Simon is mentioned by name in our story today. And it probably reveals that he was seen as the leader. The fact that his house was central to Jesus' ministry also speaks to this as well. Certainly, Jesus was their Leader, but among the disciples it seems that there was some leadership as well. The fact that Simon is mentioned by name could also mean a couple other things. First, it could be seen as evidence that Mark received the content of his gospel from Simon. Mark is believed to have been Simon's assistant in ministry, and so his account may come from Simon's perspective, as one of those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry. Simon could also be mentioned by name here because they have been staying at his house. And for that reason, he may be highlighted in today's story.

Well, what else do the disciples experience? They experienced gratified hope. Mark says that they "searched for" Jesus. This word comes from a root word which means "pursue" or "persecute". A preposition is added to the root which can add the idea of opposition or intensity. So a possible, more literal translation might be to "hunt down". Mark is giving us a picture of the disciples on an intense search. Later, their message to Jesus will be "Everyone is looking for You." To them this was great news. They were excited. This is what they had been waiting for. When Jesus had been rejected in Judea by the Jewish leaders, they had been bitterly disappointed. They wanted all Israel to become followers of Jesus, to believe as they that He was the Messiah. And now the masses are finally with them. But at this critical and exciting moment Jesus is nowhere to be found. So they hunt Him down. They are motivated by an intense hope that has finally been gratified. This is a fulfillment of their dreams and they aren't about to let it pass them by.

The disciples next experience disappointment. Jesus insists on leaving Capernaum. At this critical moment when they are experiencing gratified hope, Jesus brings it all to a grinding halt. As they leave town, they must have been bitterly disappointed. It seemed they were leaving behind all their hopes and dreams. But you know what? They stuck with Jesus. They kept their faith in Him. They continued to follow Him. And as a result they were eyewitnesses of the gospel as it was lived out in the life of Jesus Christ. They saw many more people healed and set free from demons. They saw Satan's kingdom destroyed again and again. And they experienced more and more of God's kingdom in their own hearts.

So, how does this story reveal Jesus as our example of a healthy and dangerous Christian? First, I believe that He is revealed as our example of a healthy and dangerous Christian in that He met critical situations with prayer. In our story Jesus is facing a situation that made prayer more important than sleep. There were at least two things taking place that called Jesus to this time of prayer. First, He was experiencing an unhealthy popularity. They wanted a leader who could work miracles. They wanted a messiah who would set himself up in opposition to the Romans, and make them once again a free nation. But this wasn't the type of messiah Jesus had come as. John records Jesus words in John 5:43. He says, "I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me. If another (messiah) comes in his own name, him you will receive." Jesus didn't come to be the military hero, with everyone shouting His name, wearing T-shirts with His name on the front and back. He wasn't the kind of messiah the people in Capernaum wanted to make Him. So it made for a kind of crisis. Jesus met this crisis with prayer. He wanted people to follow Him so that His kingdom might be established in their hearts. A second event that called Jesus to prayer was that He was just getting ready to

begin His first missionary tour in Galilee. This was a critical time in His ministry and He met it with prayer. There are several other instances where the gospel writers mention a specific time when Jesus spent a considerable amount of time in prayer. In each instance He is either in a crisis of some sort or He is getting ready to begin a critical phase of His ministry.

I believe our story today reveals that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who prays MORE in difficult times. Satan brings trouble upon us to make us forget God. If there are people at work who are making my life difficult, Satan wants me to handle it on my own. He suggests that I've got to do something to fix it. And if I can't fix it, then Satan puts the pressure on. "Oh, you can't handle this. How are you going to make it? Who do you think you are anyway?" And down the drain I go. It's not long before I've either forgotten about God or I'm mad at Him for letting this happen and not helping me. I don't believe this is the experience of a healthy and dangerous Christian. I believe a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who prays MORE in difficult times. Satan's plan backfires. The very thing he brings to separate me from God actually motivates me to get closer to Him.

I believe this story also reveals Jesus as our example in that His agenda for life came from time in prayer. Notice what He tells the disciples in Mark 1:38: "For this purpose I have come forth." In other words, the reason He went out to a solitary place to pray was to get His next agenda. As result of His time in prayer, He knew that the Father wanted Him to leave Capernaum and go through all Galilee preaching and casting out demons. Notice His agenda did not come from what made Him popular. He had become popular in Capernaum by healing all those who were sick. He could have said, "Oh, meeting their physical needs makes Me popular. My agenda from now on will be to meet their physical needs." Jesus didn't say that. He wasn't like those who run for political office. "Oh, Americans want to feel safe from terrorists. Ok, America, that's what I promise to do. I will make America safe." They do whatever they have to do in order to be popular and win people's votes. That's what gets them elected. Jesus wasn't like that. He didn't do whatever would make Him popular. He did whatever the Father told Him to do, while He was spending time in prayer.

I believe a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who gets their agenda for life from God. For instance, what does God want me to do in the church? How does He want me to use my spiritual gifts and talents? What people does He want me to reach out to? A healthy and dangerous Christian doesn't look for the answers to these questions by seeing what church office positions are empty. She doesn't base it on whatever she's asked to do by someone else in the church. My ministry isn't based on the economy or the amount of money in my pocket. A healthy and dangerous Christian gets their agenda for life from God. It comes as a result of spending time in prayer. Certainly there can be other factors involved. God often uses circumstances to confirm His will for our life. But the starting and ending place for figuring out my agenda is time in prayer.

There is a third way in which I believe this story reveals Jesus as our example of a healthy and dangerous Christian. He was not focused on numbers. The disciples were. They looked at the number of people looking for Jesus, and concluded this was it. This was what they were waiting for. The masses were looking for Jesus! What more could they possibly want? But Jesus didn't look at the numbers. He looked at the people's hearts. And what He saw in their hearts was not repentance. Their agenda did not match His. And as a result, to it didn't matter how many people were looking for Him, He refused to stay in Capernaum. I believe a healthy and dangerous Christian gauges the success of their church service not by the number of people in the pews Sabbath morning, but by the convicting and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. If it was all about numbers, then a huge crowd at Michigan Stadium for a Michigan Wolverines football game would be a bigger success in God's eyes than a few disciples in an upper room waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. No, it's not all about numbers. It's about the presence of the Holy Spirit convicting and empowering the people in the stadium, or in the pew.

The disciples experienced bitter disappointment in our story today. As they walked the dusty roads of Galilee, they were not happy with Jesus' agenda. They didn't want to leave Capernaum. It was home. It was the place where their hopes and dreams had finally been gratified. Following Him out of town that day went against so many of their desires. They wanted Jesus to be popular. They wanted the masses to follow Him. But instead of

sticking with their agenda, they stuck with Jesus. Their decision to follow Him in spite of how they felt is remarkable.

Have you left Capernaum? No, I'm not talking about the town in Galilee. Capernaum is the place of our hopes and dreams. Leaving Capernaum is leaving behind my agenda in order to follow God's. Sometimes my agenda and God's agenda are in harmony. He gives me the desires of my heart. But other times following God's agenda leaves me feeling bitterly disappointed. The disciples have left us a remarkable example. They chose Jesus over everything. Capernaum was home. It was where they made their living. It was the place of their hopes and dreams. They left all of this behind in order to follow Jesus.

The disciples never regretted their decision to leave Capernaum that day. Jesus' agenda for them was a million times better than their own. So it will be with us. On that day when we stand in the very presence of God in heaven, we will be glad we left Capernaum.