

## Sneaky Jesus

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*Mark 1:35-38 — In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."*

So, it looks to me like Jesus was pretty introverted. In this morning's passage, he steals away from his apostles before the sun comes up, looking for some time by himself and some time with God. This happened more than once, apparently. The Gospel of Luke says that Jesus did this often: slipping out of the house (wherever he and his disciples were staying at the time) and sneaking off early in the morning to be alone for a while. And from what I can tell in this passage, when Jesus did this, he didn't really want to be found. Otherwise, he would have told his apostles what he was doing and where he was going, and they wouldn't have had to go searching for him.

It's also possible, I suppose, that Jesus wasn't all that introverted; he was just exhausted. If you read the 15 verses before our passage this morning, you'll see that Jesus had just been through a ringer of a day. In the morning, he taught at the synagogue (I know first-hand how tiring that sort of thing can be), and according to the story, his teaching was interrupted by the shouts of a demon-possessed man. Jesus cast out the demon (and I don't know first-hand about that, but I can only imagine that's tiring too). Then, he left the synagogue and went straight to Simon and Andrew's house, where Simon's mother-in-law was bed-ridden with a sickness. As you could probably guess, Jesus healed her. It's the first healing narrated in the Gospel of Mark. Immediately, word spreads about Jesus's miraculous power, and by the evening of that same day, *everyone* is bringing people who are sick to Jesus. Two verses before this morning's passage, we read that "the whole city was gathered around the door." And Jesus, dutifully, tends to those who are seeking his help, long after nightfall.

But the next morning, at the beginning of our passage, he says, "I'm outta here!" He sneaks away to get some peace and privacy—only to be found a few hours later, when his apostles say, "What are you doing here! Everyone is looking for you—come on!" Jesus's response must have surprised his followers (remember, we're only in chapter 1—the apostles haven't known Jesus for all that long, so they are still getting a feel for the kind of person he is). Jesus doesn't say, "Okay, I'll come back with you" or even "Give me another hour out here by myself." Instead, he says, "I think we're gonna hit the road. Pack your bags. We're headed to another town. And then another. And then another. Because that's what I've come to do."

On one hand, these verses are quite comforting. Here we are reminded that Jesus got tired, just like we do. Here we learn that Jesus longed for and sought after personal time and space—and we can, too. In fact, we are meant to withdraw and to recharge regularly—not just for our own sake, but for the sake of others. We must care for ourselves well in order to care for the people around us well. Otherwise, all of our efforts, all of our do-goodery, will eventually lead to burnout or bitterness. As the Quaker writer and teacher Parker Palmer puts it, “Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have.”

So, there’s comfort in these verses, but on the other hand, there is also some discomfort. Here we are reminded that Jesus doesn’t always stay put. Here we learn that Jesus likes to wander, and when he does, he isn’t necessarily easy to find. Here we learn that, whether we like it or not, Jesus is often on the move. Maybe you haven’t experienced what the apostles experienced in this passage: waking up one morning and realizing that you can’t find Jesus. But have you ever woken up in a season of your life and realized that Jesus seems to have been gone for a while? Have you ever gone searching for Jesus in some season of your life, and found him, or at least thought you did—only to wonder later on if Jesus has gone elsewhere, because you no longer feel his spirit in a certain place, or relationship, or activity, or idea?

It would be nice if we could follow Jesus and settle in at the same time. It would be nice if Jesus led us to just one place, one set of relationships, one set of activities, and one set of ideas, which never changed, which were always right, which we never had to question, alter, or abandon. But so far as I can tell, friends, that’s not what following Jesus looks like. That’s not spiritual growth; that’s spiritual stagnancy—and eventually, spiritual decay. If we’re going to follow Jesus, our hearts and minds have to be ready for a *journey*, have to be ready to search, to strive, to let the spirit of Jesus stretch us and take us places we’ve never been before.

One of my favorite stories to tell is of someone who wasn’t quite ready to be stretched. My friend Wesley is a swine veterinarian—he travels to pig farms and treats their animals for diseases. Wesley grew up in rural Tennessee, and he does a lot of his work in rural Tennessee-like areas. One day, Wesley was on a work trip with a new colleague named Bob. Now, Wesley is about my age, and Bob was well into his 70s. The two of them are driving along, getting to know each other, and Bob notices that Wesley has a ring on his wedding finger. “So, what does your wife do?” Bob asks. Wesley pauses, then says, “Well, Bob, my husband is in seminary, and he’s training to be a Lutheran pastor.” Now, according to Wesley, Bob went like this: [hand on the back of head, furrowed brow, blinking eyes, a couple of swallows, ten seconds of silence] “But what does your *wife* do?” And Wesley says, “Bob, my *husband*, Preston, is in seminary now, and he’s training to be a pastor in the Lutheran tradition.” [Hand on the back of head, furrowed brow, blinking eyes, another swallow, half a dozen more seconds of silence] “And how does she like that?” Apparently, Bob wasn’t ready to be stretched in this way.

Friends, if you’re trying to follow Jesus and you’re struggling to find him, try stretching yourself. Try looking for Jesus in a new place: in a service project that’s out of your comfort zone; in a book that offers you a new outlook on faith; in a friendship with someone who sees the world

differently than you do—or even who sees God differently than you do. And of course, you can always try looking for Jesus in an old place but with a fresh perspective. Here at this table, friends, we take part in a familiar practice, and yet we profess that Christ is always newly present here. We can experience anew the good news that God is love each time we come to this table. So, together, let us come. Let us keep following, keep searching, keep being stretched. Amen.