

February 4, 2024
Mark 1:29-39

Epiphany 5
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Time Out”

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”

I have been a fan of the New York Giants for all my life, but I have only seen them play in person once. It was a preseason game against the Pittsburgh Steelers, and the stadium was filled with devoted Giants fans eager to see how our team was shaping up for the coming regular season. It was exciting to see my team in a live game, but I was also puzzled by why the game would stop for no apparent reason. These were not the regular “time outs” that each team is allotted each half; these were times when the teams would stand around the field until the referees gave the signal to resume play. When I asked the people with whom I was seated what was happening, they explained that these were “TV time outs,” moments in the game when the action would stop so that commercials could be played on television. Since I had previously only seen games on TV, I never realized that the game had to stop so that these commercials could air – otherwise the TV audience would miss parts of the game. While I now understood what was happening, it seemed odd that the flow of the game and the momentum that one team had gained was stopped for no apparent reason other than to sell advertising for the television networks that were airing this contest.

Time outs are a regular part of football games on all levels and play a strategic role in a team’s game plan. They can be useful especially if the team is mounting a scoring run as time is running out at the end of the half; many teams will save their allotted time outs until they get close to scoring a touchdown. Teams will also call a time out to stop the momentum of the other team or to “freeze the kicker” as he attempts a game-winning field goal. There are other times when teams call a time out when there is some miscommunication regarding a play call, taking the time out rather than incur a penalty for delay of game or making an error that results in an interception. The strategic management of time outs can make all the difference between a victory and a defeat.

While most of us in our everyday lives do not have to worry about such strategic management of time, we do know the importance of taking a “time out” of our daily schedules for rest and rejuvenation. Studies have shown that office workers need to

take regular breaks from their desks to stretch, walk around, get a beverage or something to eat in order that they may be more productive and have better physical and mental health. Employment laws require that workers – especially those involved in physical labour – be given regular breaks lest they become fatigued and place themselves and their fellow workers in peril. Persons who ignore the need for rest and renewal discover that “burning the candle at both ends” can have dire consequences for a person’s physical and mental health. Even if a person never steps onto a football field, the importance of regular “time outs” is as important for each of us as it is for a team that seeks to triumph on the field of play.

The importance of regular “time outs” is at the heart of the faith of Israel in its observance of the Sabbath. The creation story in Genesis establishes the seventh day as a day of rest, as a “time out” from everyday tasks:

- “And on the seventh day, God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.” – Genesis 2:2-3.

When God gives Moses the Torah on Mt. Sinai after liberating the people of Israel from centuries of slavery in Egypt, the Lord specifies that God’s people are to “*remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy*” (Exodus 20:8). The observance of the sabbath became a central part of the identity and practice of the people of Israel, with many of the subsequent commandments dictating specific activities that observant Jews are to avoid on the Sabbath. While some of these restrictions may appear harsh to outsiders, for Jews the Sabbath is a gift from God, a command to take a weekly time out for rest, refreshment, and renewal so that they might be ready to “*labour and do all your work*” on the remaining six days of the week. Sabbath observance is considered so important for the Jewish people that some rabbis have stated that “*those who observe Sabbath observe the other commandments.*” (Barbara Brown Taylor).

Growing up in an observant Jewish household, Jesus would have learned the importance of sabbath observance, and continued to practice it in his adult life and ministry. He would often attend sabbath worship in synagogues, including the time when he returns to his home synagogue in Nazareth and, after reading from the book of Isaiah, declares that “*today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*” (Luke 4:21). While he often disagreed with the Pharisees over their draconian interpretation of the sabbath commandment, declaring that “*the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath*” (Mark 2:27), Jesus would

regularly practice sabbath rest on the seventh day as well as on other occasions during his life, withdrawing for times of rest and renewal before resuming his ministry among God's people.

One of the occasions in which Jesus takes a "time out" for rest and reflection is in today's Gospel lesson, in which Mark continues his account of the first days of Jesus' ministry as if our Lord is running from place to place to share his message that "*the kingdom of God has come near*" (1:15). Fueled by his favourite word, "immediately/at once" (*euthys*), Mark races his readers through a day in the life of Jesus "*as a reporter might race a candidate through a day of political appearances*" (Gary W. Charles). Today's Gospel lesson begins with Jesus leaving the synagogue in Capernaum, where he had cast out an unclean spirit so that "*his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee*" (1:28), and entering the house of his disciples Simon and Andrew, accompanied by James and John who had also answered his call to discipleship on the banks of the Sea of Galilee (1:20). When he enters the home, Jesus discovers that "*Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once*" (1:30). Without any hesitation, Jesus "*came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then her fever left her, and she began to serve them*" (1:31). In Mark, Jesus' very first physical healing involved a woman, whose response to her healing is the discipleship of service, a model to which Jesus will repeatedly call his followers throughout the Gospel and which he supremely embodies in his own service:

- "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." – 8:34.
- "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." – 9:35.
- "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for all." – 10:43-45.

Her action contrasts with that of her son-in-law Simon, who calls Jesus' attention to the crowd clamoring for more healings but does nothing about it ("*When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.'*" – 1:37). For this reason, "*this woman is Jesus' first servant and joins him in the radical announcement in action of the kingdom of God, his first deacon.*" (Ofelia Ortega).

When the sabbath day ends in the evening, Mark reports that "*they brought to him all who were sick or possessed by demons*" (1:32), so that the whole city crowd the door of the place where Jesus is staying with those in need of healing. The fact that

the whole city gathers is concrete evidence of the spreading fame of Jesus and the first appearance of the crowds that will surround him throughout his ministry. In response, Jesus *“cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.”* (1:34). Although Jesus has come to destroy Satan’s power, he has not come to do so by exercising miraculous powers; Jesus will free his people from *“all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil ... with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death”* (*Small Catechism*). Commands to silence are a part of Mark’s Christology; Jesus’ the Son of Man, came to suffer and die, not for the adulation of the crowds through working miracles. The commands to silence are an indirect way of indicating that the scribes’ later charges that Jesus is a magician who uses satanic powers is false (*“And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He is Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’”* – 3:22).

- “All this is important, not because the events happened in an important place nor to important people, but because Jesus’ own epiphany is both hidden and revealed. The demons were silenced because they knew his significance. And they were silenced, and the secret kept, at the door of a home with a mother-in-law in a city where the sick and the possessed just kept showing up. Such is the coming reign at the end of Jesus’ Sabbath at Capernaum. And here the very gospel of God has come to a home and to persons at the sunset of the day at a city in Galilee.” – David Jacobsen.

After racing from place to place and encounter to encounter, Mark reports that Jesus suddenly takes a “time out” when *“in the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”* (1:35). Here Mark introduces us to Jesus as both a faithful Jew and a faithful Jew at prayer, as one who takes time and seeks a place to pray. *“For Mark, prayer is not peripheral to the identity of Jesus, and by implication, not peripheral to those who follow him.”* (Charles). Jesus will exemplify in his own life the rhythm of work, rest, and prayer throughout the Gospel; in Mark, Jesus prays alone and often, revealing not only his Jewishness but also his full humanity. In times of stress, temptation, and decision Jesus turns to God for strength and guidance:

- “O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.” – Psalm 5:3.
- “Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.” – Mark 6:45-46.

- “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” – Hebrews 5:7.

While time for solitude and prayer are important in Jesus’ life and ministry, his disciples have not yet caught on to how this might also be important for them. While our Lord is taking a “time out” for prayer, Mark reports that “*Simon and his companions hunted for him*” (1:36). The word “hunted” (*katadioko*) indicates how upset they are at Jesus’ withdrawal from the crowds who are desperately seeking to be in his presence; when they find Jesus, they declare that “*everyone is searching for you*” (1:37).

- They are astonished at his behavior and come to restore him to his senses ... Simon knows what Jesus should be doing, and it is *not* sitting in solitude and prayer. Anxious crowds await his immediate return.” – Charles.

Jesus does not reprimand his disciples for interrupting his time of prayer and misunderstanding the importance of this “time out.” Instead, he points out that he is not lost and that his task is not simply to respond to the incessant cries of the crowd and their demands: “*Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.*” (1:38). Jesus then leaves this deserted place and “*went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*” (1:39). Jesus is determined to “proclaim the message” according to God’s Will, and he will not be constricted to one locale and confined to the expectations of anxious disciples.

- “Mark does not need to specify what Jesus withdraws to pray about in such examples. They clearly indicate that Jesus comes to do God’s will, not to seek his own advantage or popularity. After Simon and the other disciples pursue him to bring him back to the crowds at Capernaum, Jesus insists that he must go and repeat his preaching and healing to the rest of Galilee.” – Pheme Perkins.

Jesus’ practice of taking regular “time outs” from his ministry of preaching and healing reveals how he continues to practice sabbath observance in his personal life and how times apart for prayer and renewal will be important for those who will be his followers and are entrusted with witnessing to the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection. While Christians may not observe the Sabbath in the same manner as observant Jews (I will always remember my encounter with a “Sabbath elevator” in a hospital on Long Island), it is important for us to take heed of this commandment

to rest, to take a “time out” from the busyness of our everyday schedules that we may find rest for our bodies and may focus on God’s Word and Will for us when we return to our daily lives as people of God. Luther teaches that our observance of the Sabbath commandment means that *“we are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God’s word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.”* (*Small Catechism*). It means that we seek to find a “deserted place” far from the noise and distractions of life so that we can truly listen to God’s Word and consider what that Word is proclaiming to us. It means that we seek out moments of solitude so that we might re-enter the arena of everyday life rested and ready to continue to work that our Lord has set before us as people entrusted with the precious gift of God’s Word and the good news of the love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord.

- “Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and place for God, and God alone. If we really believe that God not only exists but also is actively present in our lives – healing, teaching, and guiding – we need to set aside a time and space to give God our undivided attention. Jesus says, ‘Go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place’ (Matthew 6:6).” – Henri Nouwen.

Football teams take their allotted “time outs” both so that they might give their players a moment to catch their breath and to develop a strategy for plays after the time out has ended that will result in a touchdown and victory. As our Lord commanded the people of Israel to remember the Sabbath day and keep this day of rest holy, our Lord Jesus Christ invites his followers to *“come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28). As followers of Jesus, we seek to live by his example of taking a “time out” for rest and renewal so that we might be strengthened to return to the crowded arena in which we continue our mission to serve *“in full obedience to our Lord; to care for all, without reserve, and spread God’s liberating word.”* (ELW Hymn 729).

Amen.