



July 22, 2018 - Find Rest in the Desert Given by Rev. Mattei

"The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." (Mark 6:30-31)

Today's gospel story picks up from two Sundays ago when Jesus sent his disciples on a mission trip ([Mark 6:7-13](#)) instructing them to show up in simplicity and vulnerability, signs of full trust in God. They are now back and gather around Jesus to report about their experience. The verses in between their going and their coming tell the story of the beheading of John the Baptist by request of Herodias, Herod's daughter ([Mark 6:14-20](#)) as if to say that a prophetic call will cause rejection and even death.

There is much to report after a mission trip. One is given the opportunity to reflect on how the experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, have impacted him or her; what one has learned about people's needs, one's own interactions with people and what that new encounter has revealed about oneself. It's a major personal discovery, at times painful and at times enjoyable. This is a learning experience that involves some "risk" but the human growth achieved by paying attention (to the experience) is exponentially significant. The "risk" is the attitude of pride or despair that results when we don't go deep enough and end up judging ourselves by human standards. If our goal is to feel good or look good, that becomes our standard, and we fear and are anxious about any (internal or external) approval or criticism. With the help of another to whom we are accountable (a leader like Jesus, a spouse, a friend) we may engage in deeper self-analysis.

But one needs space and time to do that. One needs to be willing to enter into a deserted place. One is challenged to embrace a time of "non-doing," of imposed exile from the ego-gratification of "busy-ness;" a time of refuge from the temptation of self-importance and a sanctuary from the self-destructive numbness of keeping busy. One may find rest in the desert, which is a spiritual dimension, the land promised by God (Dt 5:30; 12:8-10). It's a solitary, remote and quiet place (Mt 6:6, go to your room, lock the door) for silent reflection, prayer, contemplation. In the desert we are given a chance to be still and know God ([Psalm 46:10](#)), and consider how "doing" has become more

important than “being” for us. It’s in the desert that the people of Israel are formed into God’s people: the new people start to take shape ([Exodus 19:5](#)).

The challenge is to overcome our cultural questions we ask ourselves, maybe to avoid the perceived difficulty of engaging in prayer. Does prayer interfere with our alleged “busy” life? Someone once said: if we are too busy to pray we are too busy. In that same spirit, Martin Luther is quoted as saying: "I have so much to do that if I didn't spend at least three hours a day in prayer I would never get it all done."¹ We wonder: Is prayer useful? Doable? Is it an escape from reality? Are we going to encounter God there?

We are not always going to have the most profound insights or the highest revelations in silent prayer. Sometimes we are blessed to experience peace and calm and joy but it does not happen very often. Sometimes our prayer brings satisfaction and contentment. But we do not sit in prayer for that. That is not what we are after; we would be most self-centered if we strove for any particular experience in prayer. The purpose we engage in prayer is simply to give God glory, to praise and honor God, to be with God even when we don’t have any feeling that God is with us, present to us. God is often experienced as being silent or absent. But when we train ourselves to be still, we begin to perceive God as the ground of our being, the foundation that keeps us standing, the life that keeps us going.

In the deserted place with Jesus we learn to explore the relativity, the impermanence and at the same time the preciousness of life. We perceive life as the ultimate gift and yet as something that isn’t ours but given in loan: time is fleeting, what are we doing with God’s life? With God’s time?

Prayer then expands to life and interactions. In prayer we learn to see God at work in the world, God in the other. We learn to see the other in God. Silence will manifest to us our humanity if we are humble enough to see; it will manifest our interconnectedness with the universe. In prayer we discover the essence of our faith and our faith will steer the way we relate to the world.

Let us find moments to enter the desert with Jesus; there our Good Shepherd will feed us the promised milk and honey of the new land.

¹ Marva J. Dawn, *Morning by Morning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001)