

Relentless

Clergy often joke about the relentless return of the Sabbath. By this, we mean that no matter what is going on in the world, every seven days, a sermon is called for, hence the relentless return of the Sabbath. Organists and choirs experience the relentless return of the Sabbath also. Come to think of it, so do the ushers, the deacons, etc. It takes a lot of people to make this work! If you have been dragged here at the behest of parents or spouse, perhaps you too have experienced the relentless return of the Sabbath.

Once, I was waiting to process into the sanctuary of the church I was serving for the convocation of one of our seminaries, and president of the seminary and one of the trustees were joking about the trustee's upcoming retirement.

"No more relentless return of the sabbath," the president said.

"No," the trustee said, "But it really has been a joy."

To which the president replied, "Relentless joy?"

In all truth, the return of the Sabbath was, during our long winter, one of the ways I stayed grounded in time, as I have written to you.

The quality of relentlessness is sometimes a virtue.

It is sometimes a bane.

We have learned an unwanted lesson of patience in the face of relentless virus this year.

There are other relentless forces: gun violence in our city, for one.

Climate change, for another.

Racism, for yet another.

We seem at times to be in a relentless sea of partisanship, a condition that most Americans bemoan, and yet nonetheless it seems permanent.

There are so many things that come at us so quickly, so unrelentingly.

It makes me think of the desert we read about today.

The word we read as *desert* today is the same word that we encounter elsewhere in Mark as *wilderness*.

You remember what the wilderness is – it's that place of fear. It's the place of temptation to settle for what we know is wrong.

The wilderness is not so frightening when we can keep it safely at bay. But what about when the wilderness suddenly seems shockingly close?

It is so easy to shrink away.

And yet when we see people in the wilderness, the call placed on Christians to be the body of Christ is also relentless.

Jesus, having compassion for his disciples, tried to pull them aside to a quiet place where they might have leisure to at least eat their supper, but the crowd followed the boats on foot until they landed.

The demands on Jesus' followers have always been relentless.

Indeed, in Mark's Gospel, the demands on Jesus are relentless throughout. Early on in the story, Jesus cautions those he heals and those from whom he casts out demons that they are not to tell *anyone*.

Why not? Surely it's good news?

Much has been made about this so-called *messianic secret* through the years. Scholars wonder why Jesus tried so hard to keep the lid on his healing ministry in the opening chapters of Mark. It appears at times that Jesus might just as well be engaged in back-alley dealings when it comes to the miracles of Mark. Constantly he says, "Tell no one."

If you read the whole Gospel of *Mark*, as our T&T group did this spring, you'll notice no one ever obeys him on it. They run immediately and tell *everyone*. It could be nothing more than Jesus is aware that once the word gets out of his extraordinary power that there will never be a quiet moment again. Once folks get that he is the source of healing and wholeness it seems that he will never have a moment to himself again. When I was working with the Mission pastor at Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis, I worked with the food pantry there. We had a set schedule for food distribution and a set list of products that we provided. Once, though, I was wondering about what happened to folks that needed food in between our pantry days. After I wondered out loud, my friend Ray replied, "There are places to go. And we support them. But we learned the hard way that if we didn't set boundaries, we would have a line all the way down Meridian Street."

One does wonder with this whole, "Say nothing, act casual" approach that Jesus seems to take early in Mark whether he sees the handwriting on the wall, if he knows what will happen if word gets out in the larger community of his power. Perhaps the whole secret is Jesus demonstrating to his disciples that it is okay to have some boundaries, to borrow from modern parlance and today's lesson certainly seems to show the consequences of Jesus' fame in the countryside.

But I think it's more than that.

God's people in every age have looked for comfort, for healing and wholeness to answer the pain of the world.

It almost leaves one to wonder whether even Jesus wanted to push pain away from time to time. A cursory glance at our story today does seem to bear it out all the reasons we've heard yet to keep tight boundaries around his time.

But there's more.

Indeed, there is a great deal more. I'm fond of novelist Reynolds Price's observation that Mark's version of the Gospel story is a passion narrative with an extended introduction.

What he meant by that was that in Mark, almost half the story is tied up with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, his arrest, trial, torture and execution. Almost half of the story!

And unlike John's narrative where Jesus' ministry last three years and he wanders freely in and out of Jerusalem, in Mark, the trip to Jerusalem is a single, deadly event.

Matthew and Luke aren't far from this, but nobody says it more succinctly than Mark.

Mark is by a wide measure the briefest of the Gospels. It's just 16 short chapters.

Mark is straightforward and to the point: as Jesus journeys around the countryside, the end destination becomes increasingly clear. And as the destination becomes clear, so does the outcome: The Roman authority cannot allow challenges to go unmet.

These healings, these exorcisms, this power: they all make Jesus into a marked man.

The clock is ticking.

And yet he is relentless.

His answer to the relentless seeking of people in pain for healing is relentless faithfulness to God's call.

That is what strikes me so much about Mark, the relentless journey to Jerusalem.

Why? Why did he do it?

The answer to that question lies in knowing who God is.

So often the Old Testament is thought of as the story of our evolving understanding of who God is. And there is a certain amount of truth to that assessment. If one reads the various authors in Hebrew scriptures, starting with the furthest back and moving toward the most recent, one does see various perspectives on God's nature and being. And sometimes those perspectives reflect an evolution of thought, to be sure.

But a book can never exhaustively tell us all we want to know about God.

And that's why I prefer instead to read the Bible, not as our evolving understanding of God, but rather as a love story. It's God's love story with us.

It's a relentless romance.

We know who God is by what God has done.

And what has God done but to make covenant and to keep covenant with God's people. God's favor, God's love for the people has never been an earned commodity. That's what makes it grace.

And throughout the Old Testament we read of God's grace for God's people.

Certainly there are seasons where God seems to have despaired of the people. God weeps at times over the consequences of the actions of the Israelites.

But never does God break covenant with them. Never does God abandon them.

God's romance of God's people is a relentless love story.

And the thing is, if we know that story, what Jesus does makes sense. It's perfectly clear why Jesus would begin the long hard journey into Jerusalem.

Jesus actions shouldn't surprise us if we know what God has done.

And it does seem that Jesus' gives in to the relentless needs of the people who are following him.

But wait, there's more. Just before where we started reading, Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, was murdered and what happens between where we started reading today and where we ended is hardly subtle: Jesus feeds five thousand people and walks on water.

Without so much as a moment to mourn his cousin's death, Jesus is followed out into the desert, into the wilderness by needy people, all of whom want something from him.

And in compassion, seeing them as sheep without a shepherd, knowing they are out in the middle of the desert, Jesus instructs his disciples to seat the people on the green grass so that he can feed them. So the disciples get all of the people who have followed Jesus out into the desert to sit down on the green grass. *On the green grass.* In the desert.

Do you remember back after his baptism when the spirit led him out into the wilderness where he was tempted? The wilderness, the desert, is a desolate place.

For years, the church read this passage and just glossed over that bit, that there is green grass in the desert, where it's not supposed to be. But now we can't un-notice it, can we?

Because if we know who God is, what Jesus does shouldn't be too much of a surprise. Green grass rising up in the wilderness...

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures... he leadeth me beside the still waters...

Everything can change so quickly. That's the terror of the wilderness – but it is also the good news of the Gospel. Everything can change so quickly.

It must have seemed at times to those disciples, those earliest followers of Jesus, like the demands on him – indeed the demands on them – were relentless.

Jesus does, after all, tell the disciples to feed the people.

There's not really much subtlety to the message is there? We're talking about seeing green grass in the middle of the desert where there isn't supposed to be green grass. When you're in the desert, in the wilderness, there's something about seeing green grass cropping up there!

It doesn't just happen.

Ask anyone who has ever tried to grow a lawn.

Something is at work.

It reminds me of that quotation from Pascal,

“Comfort thyself. Thou wouldst not be seeking me if I hadn't first sought thee...”

We're talking about a love story of God for what God has created... not just the pretty stuff and the nice stuff, but the needy, difficult, all-consuming, never-ending, bad-smelling, take all you've got and then ask for more kind of creation. We are talking about the love story of God that proclaims that “those who mourn will be comforted.”

We're talking about God's love story that calls – and sustains - folks to be willing to go with the people even out into the wilderness – and you know what the wilderness is – and there be told in no uncertain terms to feed God's people with nothing more than what it seems we already have, a few loaves and couple of fishes, and to rely on the grace of God to feed them.

It can be... no I'm sure it is... relentless.

But so is God's grace.

And so we may rest on the green grass.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.