

SATURDAY – February 14th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Lead me to you...even in the lonely places.

Dearest One, as we come together this day in sweet communion, lead me to the place I need to be. Help me to share the road to you even in the lonely places. Guide my path today and fold me in your healing wings. In your loving name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Mark 1:43-45

KEY VERSE: Mark 1:45:

“Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere” (NIV).

Christ came touching people out of the depths of his love and compassion and they were unable to keep it a secret. Thought he often gave instructions such as those given to the man healed of leprosy to keep silent, his fame was spread far and wide. Reverse psychology? At any rate, Jesus began to stay away from towns and stayed outside in, as the NIV translation calls them, lonely places. He let the people come to him. Those who sincerely wished to be healed or to learn at his feet came to the lonely places seeking him. They intentionally sought him until they found him. They didn't wait for Jesus to seek them out because they knew they needed to go to him.

I wonder how often we seek out Jesus within the lonely places. I'm not just talking about making a pilgrimage to a lonely, isolated place, but into the recesses of our inner minds and souls. Yes, I know that Christ lives within us as the temple of the Holy Spirit and that we always have access to the Lord. But, we have been told that if we seek him, we shall find him. I wonder how often we actively seek him. I know I have often been guilty of just assuming that he will be ready to answer me at my leisure, more like my servant than my Lord. It is wonderful to know that Christ calls me a friend and lives within my heart and all the lovely images that we have of the loving Savior no farther away than a thought. And, I truly believe that this is true. However, sometimes I believe we need to intentionally seek him out, not because he is not with us, but because we need the intentionality of seeking. I believe that there are times when we need to recognize the sovereignty of the Lord and come to him as supplicants instead of demanding that he be at our beck and call. Though Christ came as a servant, he is the Lord. It is now our turn to be the servant, his most especially. As our Lord he no longer has to seek us, we need to seek him.

There have been many times within my faith journey when it has seemed that the Lord was far away. I didn't seem to feel the presence of God close to me and I needed to seek to find the promises of the Lord for myself. Now, I knew that the Lord was there, I just couldn't feel him. I needed to seek within the recesses of the lonely places of my life to find the solace that I needed. There are times when I need those lonely places, when I need to get away from the ordinary, day to day thinking and feeling. Sometimes getting away to a physically isolated place helps to find that lonely place within where the Lord awaits me. Sometimes it's just a matter of seeking God within the depths of my soul, by intentionally concentrating on seeking God instead of just making assumptions about God's presence.

Jesus did not stay in the lonely places in order to keep people away from him, but to let the people decide to intentionally seek him. You and I both know that when we intentionally seek something or someone it is because we truly want to find what or who we seek. We need to choose deliberately to seek God. Then and only then will we find God. Are we doing this?

Are we choosing to deliberately seek out the one we know holds all the answers and all the power we need to become like Christ? I know that at times I am not willing to do the seeking. I am lazy and want Christ to come to me. There are also other times when I choose not to seek Christ because I am ashamed and want to hide. That is when Christ comes seeking me. How sweet to have a Lord who is willing to seek me! How sweet it must be for the Lord when we intentionally seek him! Let us seek the Lord. And when we do, we shall surely find him!

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Matthew 7:7-12

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. Have there been times in my life when the Lord seemed far away? What did I do?
2. How do I seek the Lord when I do not feel God's presence?
3. What places or circumstances help me to intentionally seek the Lord?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Remember a place or create a place where you can intentionally seek the Lord. Visit this place today and seek God's presence whether you have a specific need or not.
2. If you do not have one, create a personal worship setting, a special place within your home or office to go to seek the Lord. Use it regularly both for devotional times and deeply prayerful times when the Lord may seem far away.

Lord Jesus Christ, I know that you are always here with me, but there are times when I do not feel your presence. Help me to seek you when I feel the need for your presence. You have called me a friend and I appreciate this more than I can tell you. But, I need to remember that though you are my friend, you are also my Lord and Savior and worthy of my praise and my respect and I should not treat you as my servant. May I honor you both in my life of service to you and my prayer life with you. In your loving and sovereign name, I pray. Amen.

6th SUNDAY IN EPIPHANY – February 15th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Prepare me...to win the prize.

Dearest One, my heart loves you but my body often betrays. Keep preparing me to become more like you each day as we meet together in these moments of study and communion. Though I recognize that the journey itself is of great value, help me to focus the directions of my journey so that the destination is always you. Lead me to choose meaningful actions and words as we continue to travel the road together. In your leading name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

KEY VERSES: 1 Corinthians 9:25-27:

(25) “All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. (26) So I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step. I am not like a boxer who misses his punches. (27) I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified” (NLT).

Our Epiphany journey has brought us to a strange place today. After all the emphasis on healing, we have come to a discussion about athletes! Paul is very fond of athletic analogies, especially long distance racing. We find them in Philippians 3:14, and 2 Timothy 4:7. In today’s reading we are reminded that the athletes train hard and strive to win a prize which will fade away, but that we are striving for an eternal one. Though Paul firmly believed that our eternal life was given to us as a free gift through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, he also firmly believed that we have a part to play as well, that we strive to live good lives and to witness for Christ. Our eternal prize is not eternal life, because that comes only from Christ’s actions, not our own. But Paul intimates that there are eternal rewards that come from the faithful lives we live. These are the eternal prizes for which we strive. Personally, my rewards for faithful living come more from watching others find Christ and the joys of having the presence of the living Savior as a part of their lives. When I work faithfully to *“preach good news to the poor...proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, release the oppressed, proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (Luke 4:18-19 NIV) there are rewards which cannot be measured and they are very eternal to me. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, providing shelter for the homeless, working for social justice and all the other ways we provide better lives for God’s children bring their own rewards and it is not necessary for a crown or some future reward in heaven.

Yet, often we do not *“run straight to the goal with purpose in every step.”* We spend a great deal of our time in more fruitless endeavors and are more like the translation in the NIV, *“like a man running aimlessly”* or *“fight like a man beating the air.”* The Rev. Andrea La Sonde Anastos a trained spiritual director and intentional interim minister is the author of portions of a wonderful resource for ministers called *“Awaken – the Art of Imaginative Preaching.”* In the commentary concerning this scripture passage she writes about her enchantment and challenge of this verse. She speaks of looking at her daily planner and thinking that she spends a lot of time *“running aimlessly”* and I wonder if there are very many of us who could not say the same. She thinks of the hundreds or even thousands of church committee meeting she attended both as a lay person and as a minister in which the majority of them were devoted to *“running aimlessly”* or *“beating the air”* with our tongues if not our fists. She then offers a question: *“What would it mean to our witness in the world if we cancelled every single*

meeting that was not necessary to accomplish a measurable ministry task and devoted all those hours saved to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, or sheltering the homeless?" Such tasks are a part of our calling and much more important than fruitless meetings. I have experienced a little of this sense of poor stewardship of time over the past several months in my own ministry and feel a certain companionship with Andrea. I wonder how we might work together to minimize this "running aimlessly" and attempt to *run straight to the goal with purpose in every step.* Perhaps we can stop fighting "like a man beating the air" and bring more purpose to our words and actions. If so, we can help to bring healing into a wounded world until our Lord returns.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Luke 4: 18-21; Philippians 3:13-14; 2 Timothy 4:7-8

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. What are some ways in which I run aimlessly or fight like a man beating the air?
2. What are some ways I can be more constructive in my use of time?
3. What healing can I help bring to this hurting and wounded world?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Choose an agency which feeds, clothes or shelters those in great need. Work with it to bring healing.
2. When you must schedule a meeting, work to use the time productively to accomplish meaningful ministry.
3. Work within your congregation to foster more meaningful ministry without wasting a lot of time running aimlessly or beating the air.

Dearest Lord, I ask forgiveness for the countless hours I have spent running aimlessly instead of engaging in meaningful ministry. Guide my use of time so that I may be a more faithful steward. Help me to be a part of your healing for this wounded world in which I live. In your loving and faithful name, I pray. Amen.