



Sunday February 4, 2024  
Mark 1:29-39 (Fifth Sunday after Epiphany)

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Tony Acompanado

When was the last time you thought to yourself, “*I really want to go to a deserted place – an empty, lonely, risky, and unpredictable place where anything might happen?*”

I’d guess that *none* of you want to go to that place...and yet, we’ve all been there.

Truth be told, I like deserted places, and I’m pretty sure that it comes from being somewhat introverted. Now, many of you might find this hard to believe because of how good I fake it for my day job, but deep down, something in my very being longs for time alone – time that only a quiet, deserted place can offer. I think that’s why I love running in the wilderness alone in the early morning hours. Coincidentally, that’s exactly where Jesus has gone in today’s gospel.

Following a full day of teaching, healing, and helping, Jesus gets up early the next morning. The text even points out that it was “*while it was still very dark*”, that Jesus left the security of the house to go to this deserted place.

And just to be clear this isn’t a state park kind of wilderness with an office, a port-a-potty, and a gift shop. It’s not an Air BnB cabin in the woods. And it’s definitely not a weekend retreat in the beauty of nature kind of place.

The last time Jesus was in this kind of deserted place he was driven there by the Spirit. He was among the wild beasts. He was hungry. He was tempted by Satan. It seems like once would have been enough – been there, done that. And yet, throughout the gospels we’re told about Jesus retreating to deserted places. But why?

Did he go to pray? Maybe. But why couldn’t he just pray in the house like everyone else? Did he go because he needed to have some alone time? Perhaps. Mark says, Jesus left “*while it was still very dark*” making it likely the others were still asleep and therefore wouldn’t disturb him. Did he go to be with God? Probably.

But here’s what I’m wondering. What if the deserted place isn’t so much a *place* or a location, but rather, *an experience*? What if the deserted place isn’t somewhere *outside of us*, but rather somewhere *within us*? And what if it’s less about going *to* the deserted place, and instead about going *through it*?

The fact is most of us don’t *choose* the deserted and wilderness places of life. We don’t have to. They come to us. Those times when life is just plain hard. We don’t get our way. Things happen that we never wanted to happen. We struggle with our faith and it’s results don’t always feel tangible. In those moments it seems as if there’s only darkness and Jesus is nowhere to be seen.

The deserted places come to us as losses and sorrows; struggles and failures; break ups and breakdowns. It’s the feeling of deep loneliness and despair. It’s not knowing whether you’ll get through the day or whether you even want to.

The deserted place might be our marriage, parenting, or work. It’s those times when we’re overwhelmed and powerless. It’s the circumstances that cause us to wonder who we really are and what our life is really about. It’s chaos, busyness, and exhaustion that leave us feeling disconnected from ourselves, one another, and from God.

I don’t know exactly *why* Jesus left the house and went to the dark deserted place. I don’t know for sure what happened to him or what he experienced that morning. But I am confident that it wasn’t about Jesus trying to escape.

Regardless of how dark it may seem Jesus never leaves us. He may withdraw but that doesn’t mean he’s absent. His withdrawing in reality is an invitation for us to move to a new place – to the deserted place. He calls us out of the comfort of the house into the vulnerability of the wilderness. And I don’t think it’s about what’s happening around us or to us – but instead what’s happening *within us*. It’s a deserted and desolate place; a place where there’s only prayer – his and ours. And it’s there that we are blessed to be alone with the only One that matters – God.



Sunday February 4, 2024  
Mark 1:29-39 (Fifth Sunday after Epiphany)

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Tony Acompañado

We all have deserted places in our lives. For some it's accepting the limitations that age and disease bring. Others deal with broken relationships. Loneliness and grief are desert places for some. The deserted places present us with life changes we neither wanted nor asked for – the death of a loved one, a lost opportunity, or a shattered dream. It's all those in between places of life where what was is no longer and what will be is not yet. It's standing on the edge of the edge and not knowing.

Most of us don't like the deserted places. We tend to avoid them. They're empty places that can be scary and dangerous. There's nowhere to hide. It's the place in which we have to face up to the truth of our life, things done and left undone, who we are and who we aren't.

And it's there that we begin to recognize that our successes, possessions, and accomplishments don't ultimately count for much. In the wilderness we have to admit that we're not in control. Time in the deserted place is a matter of life and death. It's also, however, the place where our deepest healing can happen.

There is a price, though, for going to the wilderness. We must trade the security of the house for the risk of the desert. The prayer of self-surrender must begin to replace the prayer that only asks for things to happen or change. The desert prayer doesn't ask so much that *circumstances* will be changed, but that *we* will be changed. And dwelling in the desert makes that change possible.

Jesus goes to the deserted places of our lives to draw us there. If he didn't go first, if he didn't invite us to that place, my guess is, none of us would ever go there. Yet, the wilderness and desert places of our lives are sacred places. In the desert there is only God, there is nothing but God. Jesus is drawing us deeper and deeper into the heart of God. And ironically, that happens to be the very place we thought was barren, empty, and desolate.

Remember, earlier when I told you that I like deserted places. Well I think it's because when I'm standing there confronted with the harsh reality of my life – in the feelings of not being good enough, not living up to my potential, and facing all my failures. It's there in God's presence that I find comfort and reassurance – and quite possibly, the peace that passes all understanding. *There*, all of it seems manageable, because I feel like God sees through all my shortcomings to who I really am – to who God created me to be.

It's there that I'm given permission to be the imperfect version of myself – my true self. And it's there that I find the strength to step into the next conversation, the next day, and every next hard thing.

Lots of tears fall in those deserted places...so much so that I often wonder how they remain *desert* places. But if *this* is the reconnection and peace that *Jesus* finds in deserted places, then it all makes sense why he goes there – restoration.

Ten years ago, Jesus called me to a deserted place – a place I didn't want to go; a place that was scary and uncertain. It was there that I questioned whether ministry continued to be a path I wanted to pursue as I stood in a barren and empty place wondering about God's plan for my life.

Desert places don't feel good at the time; but a desert place led me to Ascension. Then a desert place led me to seminary. And a desert place is what led me to this pulpit, on this day, and to these words of hope and encouragement.

Whether we go to the deserted place, or it comes to us, it's always a place from which a message of life and good news comes. Today I invite you to go to *your* deserted place and listen, because *it is* speaking to you. It has a word for you. And I promise, it's not as empty and barren as you thought. Thanks be to God. Amen.