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Mark 6 vs 30-34: 53-56

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Title: The Shepherd leads us to Solitary Places

Primary Question:

Why are solitary places (the desert/wilderness, transitions, or the unfamiliar) so important to the Shepherd Jesus?

Loneliness feels like failure.

In a culture where acquiring Facebook friends, extending our social networks, or being in romantic relationships is prized.

Aloneness, being in a state of longing, or painful isolation, feels like failure.

Mark writes three times in the Gospel text that Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, led the disciples to “eremos topos” – Ancient Greek meaning a desert, a desolate place, a waste land; a solitary or lonely place.

“eremos topos” (vs 31, 32, 35) same phrase...

You’d think he had something on his mind?

Mark as a Jewish man was steeped in the knowledge of the Torah and the Prophets of what we call the Old or First Testament.

And “eremos topos” - are not only the words for Desert or Wilderness; but they also conjure up the national symbols of the Exodus, and the ensuing 40 years of wilderness.

“Eremos topos” – that desert, that desolate place, that long transition, where the Israelites wondered around and around and around. Not knowing where they were going. All the while trying to figure out if this God, this Yahweh, this fiery and cloudy pillar could be trusted.

“Eremos topos” evokes a collective memory - of Moses and later Joshua...
Of learning to trust a home-grown leader instead of Pharaoh.
A Shepherd.

Scholars believe that in this section of Mark’s gospel, Mark is making a direct quote from the book of Numbers chapter 27.... Where the Israelites were in the desert.

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You will remember that Moses was forbidden to enter into the promised land because of his anger. And so...

¹⁵ Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, ¹⁶ “Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation ¹⁷ who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd.” ¹⁸ So the Lord said to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him...

Mark by quoting this, was referring to a time when the leadership of Israel was in transition. And here too, Jesus looks on the assembled people, scurrying to him for more signs, more miracles, unable to rest. And he has compassion on them, for they were without a Shepherd:

- the Kings of Israel (Herod and sons) had sold out, and
- John had been executed.

So Jesus steps in as Shepherd:

- he listens, he has compassion, he teaches and...
- he leads them to green pasture – uh no he leads them into the desert- “eremos topos”

What is it about deserted places, lonely places, transitions, unfamiliar moments that are so important to the Shepherd Jesus?

To reflect on this. We need to turn to the writings of the mystics, desert Mothers and Fathers, poets, monastics, and theologians.

So.. let us ponder the words of

- Mother Theodora (5th Century Desert Mother),
- St. Augustine,
- Fr Richard Rohr, and
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer (German anti-Nazi activist and Lutheran theologian).

These Saints, will be our Shepherds this morning, as we traverse our own “eremos topos”, the lonely place, the wilderness, the desert.

Amma Theodora – Desert Mother. Although she is also said to have posed as a Desert Father! She lived near Alexandria in Egypt.

Running into the desert because she had wronged another and sinned against God. In the desert, she intentionally sought transformation for her life.

She writes that:

“Time in [a solitary place] is rarely bliss. It can be hard work. And at other times it seems as though nothing is happening. We may lose energy, our body becomes faint, our mind fills with thoughts that we would rather not think about. And we are tempted to leave

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the solitary place. But she says, if we persevere, the temptations will cease, and we will be embraced by God in perpetual prayer.”

**The Desert Mothers teach us that it is tempting when the stillness gets hard, to distract ourselves (with conversations, books, phones, movies).
But that if we stay, we can integrate all of our experiences (body, mind and Spirit) and become people of wisdom before God.**

Saint Augustine in the Confessions tracked his journey into the self...

What a gift he gave us. Because through his writings, we begin to see the mysterious relationship between knowing God, and knowing ourselves...

It seems that the more we get to know ourselves, our strengths, our weaknesses, our shadows... that we are drawn toward Transcendence.

I was sitting in a support group once, and I heard a man make the journey for the first time from self toward God.

He said.

“I am struggling so much with my addictions. That I realize I need a higher power. The higher power cannot be me. My mind is so confused, I manipulate myself into addictive behavior. Higher Power must be something bigger than me. I need there to be someone bigger than me”

Through the writings of Saint Augustine, we realize that in the desert we encounter ourselves. And because we encounter ourselves, we realize our need of God.

- **The journey toward the self becomes the journey toward God.**

Father Richard Rohr, that prolific Franciscan writer, reflects on spirituality as we move into the second half of life.

Rohr says that the religious and spiritual ways we are taught as young people, will not be enough for the second half of the journey.

He says that each of us grow in dissatisfaction and longing.

And It is only when we pay attention to this longing in times of solitude;

- when we give up the idea that we know how it all works,
- that we know God and how to nurture the Spiritual life...

It is only then, that we are met by the Spirit in our True Selves. And we begin a new adventure.

Reflecting on midlife and spirituality, author Nick Page, writes a fabulous and funny little book – called the Dark Night of the Shed.

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The night was dark. Cold.

I had woken suddenly, as so often, with a swarm of thoughts buzzing around my head. The usual greatest hits package of my fears and failures on repeat. I knew that it would be pointless trying to get back to sleep.

Life as a middle-aged man had become complicated and confusing. At the time when I felt as though I should be confident and assured, I often felt anxious and afraid. I

At the same time, I knew that something was happening within me, something was changing. I knew that I was entering a time of growth, setting out on a new adventure. It was a curious thing, but I felt both more fragile and yet stronger than ever before.

It was then that I had my vision. I knew what would solve things. I knew with piercing, laser-focused certainty what I needed to make all things right.

I needed a shed. A really, really good shed.

Behind me, there was a sigh.

'It's two o'clock in the morning,' said The Wife sleepily. 'What are you doing?'

'I'm thinking about the shed,' I replied.

There was a pause.

'Of course you are,' she said.

I nodded. She understood. It all made perfect sense.

So in this time of transition of life, Nick drew into a solitary place. A shed.

Much to his wife's chagrin.

And Nick began, what Richard Rohr calls the adventure of the second half of life.

So for Richard Rohr, the lonely place is a place of surrendering the God we think we know.

We learn that we are not in control, that life is hard and that my life is not all about me.

Shepherd Jesus, leads us to the lonely places.

The desert is a place, not an easy place, but a necessary place to encounter ourselves, surrender and be loved and filled by Christ.

Where we are transformed to better love our fellow human beings.

I would like to end with a poem written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a German prison, while he waited execution for his anti-Hitler actions.

For who better to instruct us on life in the solitary places than this man.

And I invite you, as you listen...

To think about what it means for you to be led by Shepherd Jesus into lonely, solitary places.

- To switch off the cell phone and computer;
- To intentionally steal yourself away from the business;
- To leave reading material behind.
- To be still, alone with your thoughts, feelings and body.
- And to see what stirs.

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BONHOEFFER'S POEM "WHO AM I?"

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

**The Shepherd leads us to Solitary Places.
Where loneliness is not failure. And longing is blessed.
By the Divine Embrace.
Amen**