

## “The Pause That Refreshes” (Mark 1:35) Epiphany 5, Feb. 8, 2009

I guess if you're the competitive type, it can bubble up in most anything you do! Like with my friends' six-year old son. He was taking piano lessons, and being the competitive type, his goal was to learn each piece of music as fast as he could, so that he could get to the end of the book as fast as he could. That in itself was no problem, but one day his mom heard him practicing and noticed something was a little off. The notes were right, but... Then she realized what it was. She stopped him and pointed to a bat-like squiggle in the music. “That’s a rest,” she explained. “When you see one of those, it means the composer wants you to stop playing for one beat. Just rest.” “I know that,” he said. “Then why do you keep on playing?” she asked. “Because I don’t need to rest!” he answered.

To him, that made perfect sense. Why rest if you don’t need to rest? We, of course, know better. In music, it’s not just the notes that count. The rests matter, too. So if the composer says to rest, you rest. If the composer says to pause, you pause. Otherwise, you ruin what the composer has created.

And you know what? That’s not so different from the way it works in life. We were never meant to just keep going non-stop. Our bodies need rests and pauses. So do our souls. In fact, the need is so great that God has deliberately inserted rests and pauses into our lives. First, He commands a major rest every week: “**Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.**” Sabbath literally means the “*stop day*” – as in: *Stop with the usual busyness and take time out to refresh body and soul!* And God’s instructions don’t end there. He also wants us to take time out each day: for prayer, for reflection, for listening to His Word. *Mini-sabbaths*, we might call them – or quiet times, daily devotions. What matters is that we make them a priority. For these rules are not just arbitrary. They are serious instructions from the God who made us and knows what is best for us. There is no way constant busyness can produce an abundant life! Our busyness requires balance. Now and then, we need to take time out. A wise person remembers this. If God says to rest, we rest. If God says to pause, we pause. That’s the only way to make the most of what God has created us to be.

Now, these days many people do take time out to care for the body. They clearly understand the need to get enough sleep, to exercise, to eat right, and even take time to relax. But what many people don’t seem to understand is that we’re not just bodies. In fact, the most important part of us is not the body. However much we care for it, one day our body will turn to dust, whereas our true self – our spiritual self; our soul – will go on forever. So wouldn’t you think that would be our primary focus? Taking care of our soul, nurturing it, refreshing it. But often that’s not much of a concern at all. Why, once I even heard a pastor say he sometimes didn’t have time to start the day with prayer because it interfered with his morning run! That is so backwards! No matter how well we care for our bodies, no matter how well-toned and well-rested they may be, our quality of life is still going to suffer if we don’t take good care of our souls.

In fact, when we forget this, it kind of puts us in a situation like one I faced years ago with my car. There I was, driving over to visit some members, when all of a sudden my car sputtered and died! What was going on?! There was no reason for this to happen. I had just had the car serviced. It should have been in tip-top condition! But obviously, it wasn't. Must be some problem the mechanic had overlooked! Fortunately, I was close to my destination, so I walked the rest of the way, and when I got there, I called AAA, who immediately sent out their own mechanic. He looked things over very carefully. Then, with a barely concealed smirk, he told me, "I think I've figured out your problem." And do you know what it was? I had run out of gas. That was it! I was just out of gas. And as embarrassing as that was, what was even more embarrassing was that the thought hadn't even occurred to me! I hadn't even looked at the gas gauge. The truth is I'd been travelling on fumes for quite a while – without even knowing it!

And isn't that a parable of life?! Spiritually-speaking, a lot of folks are travelling on fumes these days – also without even knowing it. Outwardly, they may seem to be in tip-top condition. Physically, financially, career-wise, their lives may seem fine. Yet, inside something is lacking. What it takes to "fuel" an abundant life is lacking. And maybe they can travel on fumes for a while – maybe even quite a while – but no one can do it indefinitely. Not if they want the best quality of life. Plus, there's no need to do it indefinitely – or to do it at all! God is more than willing to refresh our spirit with His Spirit! It just doesn't happen on the run! We need to take time out from the busyness. We need to be still and focus on God. We need open up to Him through prayer, reflection, and listening to His Word. Then God will refresh us – with grace, with strength, with peace. Yes, then God will refresh us in the very depths of our souls!

It's worth noting that even Jesus took time out for this. Today's Gospel offers an example. First, we see Jesus worshipping in the "**synagogue**," as He did every week. Then we see Him having a very busy day! And then Mark tells us: "**In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there He prayed.**" See the pattern? As busy as He was, it was important for Jesus to take time out for public worship and personal prayer.

We may wonder why Jesus chose to do this. Why, if He was truly God? But the answer, of course, is that Jesus was also truly human. He also had a truly human body and a truly human soul. And being truly human ourselves, we know how exhausting a busy day can be – even when you're not working miracles! What's more, we know that once you're exhausted, you're likely to stay that way unless the body is rested and the soul refreshed. That's just life in this world. Even for Jesus, that was life in this world. Even for Jesus – which suggests a better question to ask: If even Jesus needed time out to refresh the soul, why we would ever think we don't need it? Jesus was perfect. We're not. And that's all the more reason for us to take time out from the busyness, open up to God, and let Him replenish our reserves – through Sabbath worship, as we are doing right now, and through daily prayer, reflection, and listening to His Word.

Now, some may be thinking, “*I know, I know! I really should take time out like Jesus did – not just for Sabbath worship, but for daily devotions, too. It’s just that...*” And let’s stop ourselves right there. It’s just that *what?* We all know the excuses. We all know how plausible they can sound. And we all know they’re baloney. The truth is, we take out time for all kinds of things that aren’t nearly as important as time with God; things that really aren’t that important at all. And we do it on a regular basis. There is no reason why watching TV should trump time with God, or why playing golf should, or reading novels, or going to ball games, or surfing the net, or any of a million other things we can spend our time doing. However busy we may be, there is still some discretionary time, and the real issue is how we use it. How we choose to use it. If it’s important to have a personal relationship with God, then it’s important to spend personal time with God. Even if it means getting up a little earlier. Jesus did, “**while it was still very dark.**” And even if it’s tricky finding a place to be alone. Jesus “**went out to a deserted place.**” It can be done! And taking time out *is worth* it – for our relationship with God; for our quality of life. We simply have to choose to do it!

So what does this mean in practical terms? Well... If you’re not yet taking any time out for daily devotions, let this be the day you start. It’s easy enough. Choose a time, choose a place, then start. If you need help, there’s help available. In the narthex, for instance, there’s an assortment of devotional booklets – *Christ in our Home, Portals of Prayer*. Feel free to take one home. Or take a look in our library; plenty of resources there. Maybe stop by a Christian book store; plenty of resources there. Or just open your Bible in the middle. Chances are, you’ll wind up somewhere in the book of Psalms. And that can help you, too. The psalms are great for priming the pump, for getting your own prayers going. The main thing is to start.

So what if you’ve already started, but daily devotions are kind of hit or miss? Let this be the day you stop missing and make devotions a habit. Here again, it does help to choose a specific time and place. Treat devotions as a daily appointment with God. *At this time, at this place, I will meet with God for so many minutes through prayer, reflection, and listening to His Word.* Such consistency is rewarding! The more devotions become a habit, the more they’ll equip you for the rest of the day. Ask anyone who’s developed the habit. Anyway, once you’ve started, the main thing is consistency. Get in the habit of daily devotions.

And what if you’re already in the habit? I hope that’s true for a lot of us! Because that’s one sure sign of healthy faith: being devoted to prayer! But even if we are in the habit, there are ways to go deeper in prayer; ways to grow closer to God. We might also think about expanding our time with God. If we usually take so-and-so many minutes, why not try doubling the time? And while we’re at it, why not take a closer look at how we spend our time with God. Might we want to focus more on adoration, say, or confession, thanksgiving, or supplication? Now and then, might we even want to take a big chunk of time for prayer – a day, a weekend, or even more? There are some real benefits to that!

I know, that may sound like a lot, but actually it used to be the norm – taking big chunks of time for prayer. And it still is in some places. For instance, years ago on a tour of Greece, I got to talking with our guide, Zina. She was engaged, and interestingly enough, one of the things she just didn't understand about her fiancé was why he never took time out for prayer retreats, not even at the local monastery. What was up with that? She said her brother went on retreats at Mt. Athos three or four times a year. That's what she considered normal. And just so you know, her brother was an Olympic athlete, not a monk. I just listened, of course. I didn't have the nerve to tell her that for us even getting away once a year would be quite a luxury! For her, several retreats a year was normal. Likewise, worship each week. Likewise, prayer time every day. Normal.

Normal. And who's to say her idea of "normal" was wrong? Not me! Not at all! You know, there's a lot of truth in the old hymn: *"Oh, what peace we often forfeit; oh, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!"* That's worth remembering! Whatever "normal" may be for others, let's make sure that what's normal for us reflects Jesus' pattern in our text: time out for weekly worship; time out for daily prayer. As we do that, God will refresh us – with grace, with strength, with peace! Yes, God will refresh us in the very depths of our souls! Amen.