



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

Blessed Balance

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 8, 2015
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany: Based on Mark 1: 29-39*

A couple of weeks ago in The Forum, I admitted to being a life-long seeker of balance—seeking balance in my life, in my sense of the world and God in it, balance between work and play, between family and vocation, between belief and disbelief. It seems that I have always been in search of that sweet spot where work, family, religion, the big three, instead of making me crazy could actually give meaning to life. Though there happily have been moments of what felt like balance, what I most definitively can say is that I have been a good proponent of it for others, having spoken often about it in a variety of settings, making the claim that balance and holiness are closely intertwined and maybe even synonymous. But like finding God, finding balance is an art, not a science. It is a life work, and as with most important ones, this one also exists in the journey much more than as the destination.

All this comes to mind this week because of this fairly straightforward story about Jesus. On the surface, of course, it is another healing story; but it is more than that. It provides us a snapshot into what life for Jesus may have been like. Regardless of how each of us understands the miracles themselves, I believe there is ample evidence that Jesus was indeed experienced as a healer. Wandering mystics and healers were a part of the religious scene at this time in Palestine, and even secular accounts bear witness that Jesus was a star within this genre. I don't think there is any doubt that people flocked to him, attesting to the power of his charisma and of his message of wholeness and healing. Beyond just the message, my faith tells me that he *brought* wholeness and healing to scores of people.

Along with the healing stories, there are references, so numerous as to be quite compelling, to Jesus' consistent choice to step aside, to repair to a quiet place, to center himself, indeed to find balance. Though he obviously "worked" long hours, neither the preponderance nor the seriousness of the need around him prevented his withdrawing when he needed to. In our parlance we would say that he did this in the interest of self-care. I suppose there is nothing wrong with viewing it that way, but it is important to remember that Jesus was not choosing from a menu that offered a day at the spa or an unstructured day praying in the wilderness. Jesus was in search of God, not of relaxation; and though both are important, I think seeking the former is something that is harder for us to do. I am not inclined to get all high, mighty and pious about this, for I readily admit that I don't get much of it. But I do wonder if greater simplicity in our search for balance might deepen its benefit to us.

We might begin simply by asking quite honestly how long has it been since we have been really quiet? The need for it in our lives is convincingly documented; but particularly when we speak of quiet time that could look anything like prayer or meditation, we often go to great lengths to avoid it. In my own search for God, which I believe is genuine—as I believe yours are—I can find a million things to do rather than to sit down to pray. Hardly any of these other activities are bad things, maybe a little too much mindless television; but most are things that make me feel productive and on top of my life. You know what they are—responding to emails, doing a little work, reading something I really need to read, returning a few calls. The drill is quite familiar to all of us.

I would imagine that for most of us intentional quiet time—not zoned-out time in front of the computer or television, but real, honest-to-God quiet time—is desperately rare. We make prayer time so complicated and task oriented that we avoid it. Often the best prayer—"best" admittedly an inelegant way of speaking of prayer—is the act of sitting quietly in the presence of God with no words, no requests, no plans, nothing—just us and God. The thought scares us to death. Too often, even if we look quite different from this, deep inside we are frantic, driven

people, busy beyond reason, paddling with all our might to get wherever we are going—even if on some level we have forgotten why we are going there. And the thought of being honestly quiet is a threat.

And, of course, our children and grandchildren live in the same craziness. I have a friend about my age—what was he thinking—with three youngish children. When I hear him casually describing their activities, I lose my breath. His wife and he drive the kids to clarinet, to soccer, to swimming, to fencing, to seminars on how to be a billionaire before you are 15. You name it, they are in it! Every moment is planned with something important, and compliance is not optional but the expectation!

Most of us are there in one way or another. In fact, when we are truly honest with ourselves, we judge our lives by how busy we are, seeming to believe that the busier we are, the better we are. Clergy are masters at this, having the added advantage of a liberal dose of self-righteousness in the telling of the story. And on the surface, for us as for most, it works pretty well. Our culture knows how to reward this kind of life orientation. But when it goes unchecked, it creates a society of overwrought, stressed-out people who are succeeding or not in all the ways of the world but feeling unsatisfied inside. It is a trick to know how to do it, to live in balance—a life that is active and prayerful, productive and quiet, earnest and joyful. Sometimes we get it and sometimes we don't. Most likely that was true for Jesus, too. The fact that there is clear evidence that he left work—worthwhile, life-changing work in desperate need of being done—for a quiet place to regenerate himself by reconnecting with God is strong evidence for our need to do so as well.

This will stop short of being a self-help sermon with three suggestions for how to do it. The church is a lot of things in the world, some good, some bad. One area, though, in which it scores quite high is its sense of rhythm. There is a reason the Sabbath has survived all these years in a variety of ways: it survives because we need it. We need to pray—not to get what we want, but in order to find God, which in the end is what we most profoundly want even when the words fail in expressing it. Jesus went away to find a place to be quiet. And so must we—somehow, somewhere—we have to find a place and the courage to put ourselves squarely in the presence of God. There are no rules about how or where to do it. Richard Rohr wisely writes, *The only people who pray well are those who keep praying.*

It doesn't really matter whether we are sleepy or wide-awake, agitated and distracted, or peaceful and pious. It doesn't matter whether we are so conscious of God's presence that the air around us seems rarefied or the more often reality that we feel as though we are fooling ourselves and just going through the motions. It doesn't matter. It matters that we keep praying.

A week from this coming Wednesday, the church enters its primary season of thinking about such things: Lent. It begins with an odd and archaic ritual of having ashes placed on our foreheads, reminding us of our mortality—not to forewarn of death but to enhance the power of living. Mastering the art of long, sad faces is not the desired result; rather it is to heed the nudging of the church to simply be—to be simply in the presence of God.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

© 2015 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022