

Mark reports three occasions of Jesus seeking solitude and silence to pray. The first comes after a long day of teaching and a late night of healing. It would be understandable if Jesus slept in. Mark says he rose early, while it was still quite dark, some time between 3:00 and 6:00 am, and went to a deserted place to pray.

A deserted place is where the Spirit drove Jesus following his baptism. It was the place of temptation and testing. Why would Jesus voluntarily return so soon to the scene of his trial? The anger of Simon and Andrew, James and John is a clue.

The boys awake to find Jesus missing. The English text says they “hunted” for him, which could sound like any search for a missing person. The Greek word, however, is a compound form the verb “to pursue or persecute.” It is almost always used in a hostile sense, for hunting down one’s enemies. Jesus called the disciples to become fishers of human beings, but instead they immediately hunt him down.

Simon and Andrew now play the role of the adversary in the story of Jesus’ temptation. They want Jesus to capitalize on his fame. Jesus enjoyed great success in Capernaum. Maybe the boys don’t have to leave home. They could set up headquarters in Simon’s house and let the world come to them.

Elizabeth O’Connor writes in *Search for Silence*: “Too often our point of gravity is outside ourselves in events or other people, or at the circumference of our lives. This is a state of lostness.”

While it is still quite dark, Jesus goes to a deserted place to gaze into the night sky, to be reminded of who he is and of what he is called to do, to not get lost in the applause of the crowd.

This is but the first instance of the distance between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus opts for silence and solitude to recenter his attention on his mission; the disciples intrude, begging him to cash in on his fame.

Jesus tells the boys, *Let us go on to neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also*. Jesus’ mission is to proclaim/preach; the people seeking for him want to be healed, not listen to another sermon. Perfectly understandable, I think. But, then, I think like Simon and Andrew.

Jesus thinks differently. Rather than confine his ministry to Simon’s home town, he deliberately proceeds into the wider, multicultural world that was first-century Galilee to proclaim/preach. Paul thinks like Jesus. “An obligation is laid on me to proclaim/preach the gospel. I have become all things to all people, so that through every possible means I might bring some to salvation.”

The second time Mark records Jesus praying is following the feeding of the five thousand. He climbs a mountain to pray. The third time is in Gethsemane where he asks the boys to stay awake awhile while he goes off by himself to pray. They fall asleep and Jesus is arrested.

In Mark, Jesus seeks solitude three times to pray. Each time it is dark. In the whirlwind of activity that is Jesus' life and work, in the face of fame and opposition, Jesus seeks solitude and silence in order to maintain his center of gravity, his commitment to his mission.

Nothing has changed human nature so much as the loss of silence, argues Max Picard, author of *The World of Silence*. The invention of printing, technology, compulsory education—nothing has so altered human nature as the lack of a relationship with silence, a silence as natural as the sky above or the air we breathe. In losing silence we have not merely lost one human quality but the whole structure of our nature has changed.

Isaiah addresses Jews living in exile in Babylon. The physical center of their identity, the Temple in Jerusalem, lies in ruins. Their center of gravity, the covenant relationship with God, is frayed if not fractured. What does Isaiah advise? Get up early, while it is still dark, and lift up your heads, behold the grandeur of creation and remember the creator.

Few things aid the recovery of our center of gravity like a cloudless, starlit night. The night vision of creation undimmed by city lights settles our restless souls and stills our anxious minds. Starlit prayer is the death of every identity that does not come from God, it restores our sanity and grounds us in reality.