

# The Stewardship of Our Lives

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**Isaiah 40:21-31 and Matthew 1:29-39**

We are not even finished with the first chapter of the gospel of Mark, and already we are breathless. “And just.” “Immediately.” “And immediately.” “At once.” If this was an eighth grade English paper, I would have “word choice” marked all over it in red ink. Scholars have different theories: the author of Mark wanted to signal urgency. Or the eminence of Jesus’ return. Or simply to drive the story along at a fast pace.

We get more of it this morning. Jesus has been baptized and tempted. He has called disciples. He has taught and healed. Already he has developed an impressive resume. People are paying attention and the crowds are growing. And it keeps up, at a nearly relentless pace. They go to a house of one of the newly called disciples for dinner, where Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law, offering a much better hostess gift than flowers or a bottle of wine. A crowd forms around the house and he cured and he healed and he cast out demons. You can just imagine the scene, hot, crowded, chaotic, a combination of fear and hope and expectation. Then night comes.

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We are in a year of stewardship, a year when we think in focused ways about how we care for and offer all the gifts that God gives us. We have looked at, and will continue to look at, money, relationships, our history, this building, our particular gifts, and many, many more. At heart, at root, though is something even more fundamental. We alluded to it last week as we pondered Jesus’ incarnation and connected it to ours. The gift of our lives. How we are stewards, good and faithful stewards, of the gift of our lives.

It seems so simple, and yet it is not. Mary Oliver asks the question in her often-quoted poem: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” (“The Summer Day”)

We focus that as we remember the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is: what are you doing for others?”

In terms of stewardship, then, we believe that God gave us life, and that we care for that gift best when we invest it in others.

That can take on many forms...

- Remember what the famous Scottish runner from "Chariots of Fire," Eric Liddell, says to his sister Jenny: “I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast! And when I run I feel his pleasure.”
- Or Bach, who said "I play the notes as they are written but it is God who makes the music."
- Someone asked the writer Flannery O’Connor, “Miss O’Connor, why do you write?” She replied, “Because I’m good at it.” She explained, “There is no excuse for anyone to write fiction for public consumption unless he has been called to do so by the presence of a gift.”

We are given life, a gracious gift from God, the core gift. And then we are given particular gifts by which the gift of our life is nurtured, gifts that serve others: creativity, wisdom, compassion, in a variety of forms, our own versions of running or composing or writing. Yours are yours and mine are mine.

The whole point of Jesus’ earthly ministry, of incarnation, if we can be so crass as to call it a point, is to see what such a life looks like, with its gifts being fully utilized to serve others.

Now we are not Jesus, I know. Yet there is no doubt that Jesus’ human life can be a model, an example, a benchmark, for how we live our lives. What will we do with our one wild and precious life? We will live it, to the fullest, using our special and particular gifts in the service of others.

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But wait. Jesus knew something that we often forget. We heard from the prophet Isaiah: “God does not grow faint or weary.” God doesn’t tire, but we do. “God does not faint or grow weary;/God gives power to the faint,/and strengthens the powerless./Even youths will faint and be weary,/and the young will fall exhausted;/but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,/they shall mount up with wings like eagles,/they shall run and not be weary,/they shall walk and not faint.”

(I don’t know if “mounting up with wings like eagles” is a Super Bowl prediction or not, though I know that “eagles” appear dozens of times in the Bible and the “patriots” zero – I’m just saying.)

What I do know, what scripture teaches us, is that we need renewal in order to fully serve. We grow weary and faint, even the youngest and strongest among us. And God strengthens us, gives us power. Jesus knows that.

If you noted, as we were rehearsing the breathtaking events of Mark’s gospel, we ended with night falling. Take care to note what happens next. Jesus gets up. Early. Very early. And he goes to a deserted place to pray.

Even Jesus understood that a ceaseless regimen of teaching and healing and curing would empty him out. So he went to a deserted place to pray. One Jesus is plenty and one savior is enough, so that must mean that we are called – even in the face of our deep service to others and the world – to emulate, to acknowledge our need for replenishment, for rejuvenation, for rest, for Sabbath.

If it is true for Jesus, how much more so must it be true for us. If we give and give until we are depleted, then we cannot live fully into our vocation, or, stated in the negative, if we empty our tanks, we are not much good use, and not very good stewards.

What does going away to a deserted place and praying look like for you, for me, in 2018? It will look different for each of us. For some it will mean an electronic sabbath, putting down your phone or device for an hour, a day, whatever it takes.

For some it will mean calling time out in a crazy and busy schedule filled with practices and games. For some it will mean examining an intense work pattern and making a shift, small or big.

And a deserted place may be a drive, or a walk, or a nap, or time on the elliptical. This is not about technique, but perspective, and posture.

And this is not selfish. Get over that. “Self-care” – though I don’t really like that phrase – can be selfish, but this is not about that. This is legitimate, authentic care for self as a gift of God, that tends to self as a part of the holy cadence of human life.

So it is *spiritual*. That’s what concerns us, we who think we are not spiritual, or that we don’t pray the right way, or whatever. But this *is* spiritual care, where care for the self really becomes stewardship of the soul.

“*What do you mean by spiritual rest?*” John Calvin famously asked. He answered: “When we keep holiday from our own works, that God may perform (God’s) own works in us.”

When we work all the time, even for good, we can forget who is actually doing the working. Resting is a reminder of that. Shelly Miller writes that “Rest provides fine-tuning for hearing God's messages amidst the static of life.”

So you go to your deserted place – and you pray. Prayerful resting, where we thank God, and ask God, and seek God. This rhythm is as old as creation and as contemporary as a call to put down our phones every once in a while and breathe deeply in the Spirit of God.

Jesus goes away and prays and then re-emerges to fully engage – “Let us go on to the neighboring towns so that I may proclaim the message there also – for that is what I came out to do.”

Here is the rhythm, the pattern, the cadence:

- Claim your life as a precious gift from God.

- Invest that gift fully, and its special and particular attributes, in the service of others.
- When you are weary, and you *will* be weary, retreat, retreat to renew.
- After disengaging, re-engage, even more wildly, in the work you are called to do.

And then repeat, and repeat, and repeat, all to the glory of God, for such a time as this. Amen.