

EPIPHANY FIVE, YEAR B, FEBRUARY 4, 2024

There's a story about Satan that called a convention of his associates to talk to them about how to keep people from God. He said to them, "I want you to distract them from gaining hold of God and maintaining that vital connection throughout their day!"

"How are we going to do this?" his associates shouted. "Keep them busy in the nonessentials of life and invent innumerable schemes to occupy their minds," he answered. "Tempt them to spend, spend, spend, and borrow, borrow, borrow. Persuade them to work for long hours, 12 - 16 hours a day, 7 days a week, so they can afford their empty lifestyles. Keep them from spending time with their families. Offer no escape from the pressures of work!"

"Over-stimulate their minds so that they cannot hear that still, small voice of God trying to talk to them. Entice them to be on their phones, ipads and their laptops constantly. Text them continuously so they have less and less verbal communication between them. Pound their minds with the news 24 hours a day. Bombard them with social media posts offering quick fixes and false hope. Shower their posts with beautiful people so they'll believe that outward beauty is what's important and they'll become dissatisfied with others and themselves. Jam their minds with all kinds of video games so they don't have time to just be still.

Even in their recreation, let them be excessive! Send them to amusement parks, sporting events, plays, concerts, and movies. Keep them too busy to go out in nature and reflect on God's creation. And when they do go to the mountains or to the shore make them so active in what they do there that they don't have time to pray, time to think, time to remember their God or thank God for God's goodness.

Keep them busy, busy, busy! And if they must talk to God, make sure that they don't take time to listen to God. Soon they will be working on their own strength, sacrificing their health and family.

"Do this and it will work!", Satan concluded. So the convention ended. They all went eagerly to their assignments causing Christians everywhere to have little time for God or their families and having no time to tell others about the power of God to change lives and to meet their real needs. So, has the devil been successful at his scheme? You be the judge!

You know it's funny that one of the seven deadly sins is slothfulness (laziness) but maybe it should be about being busy for busy sake and believing that being busy is what makes you successful or your life meaningful or that you're indispensable. Truth is sometimes being busy for busy sake is just an excuse for not dealing with your loneliness, or other characteristics that leads to tough choices that have to be made like who you truly are outside of your busyness. Being busy can become your idol and an avoidance in doing things that actually make a difference. Being busy doesn't offer hope. Does it offer joy? Do you even find peaceful moments if you fill your life with busyness?

In today's Gospel reading we see Jesus on the Sabbath doing many things. He went to the synagogue to worship then he went with his disciples to Peter and Andrew's home and there he brought healing to Peter's mother-in-law. Later, in the evening a huge crowd gathered at the door and Jesus healed many of the sick of all kinds of diseases. It was a very full and busy day.

The next morning, very early in the morning we hear that Jesus got up, left the house and went to a solitary place, a quiet place, where he prayed. It must have been for quite a while, because Simon Peter and his companions go looking for him and when they find him they tell him that everyone is looking for him back in Capernaum - people with needs, people who want healing, people who want his touch, his word, his hope.

The passage concludes with Jesus telling his disciples - "Let us go to the nearby villages so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." And so he goes. What's important to note here is that Jesus abruptly left Capernaum. He could have stayed as he was successful and the people were flocking to see him and also being healed. They would have kept him busy, busy busy and it would have been easy for Jesus to stay and bask in all of the attention. He could have become their resident rabbi and have a normal life where his family wouldn't think he was crazy. He wouldn't have to rely on others to support his ministry or be poor, hungry or afraid for his life.

That's why he went off to pray. It was not only to recharge his spirit but to think hard about his choices and it was a tough decision to make. Does he follow the voices wanting him to stay and keep him busy just for them or does he follow God's voice telling him he has to take the risk, and move on and accept the pitfalls and challenges that would come his way.

How often have we traded taking the risk of a challenge for security? Jesus faced this too and he had a decision to make and we know what choice he made. But Jesus story is our story as we have choices too.

It's a two fold choice. Do we fill our lives with busyness so we don't hear what Jesus is really calling us to do? Or if we hear Jesus calling us are we looking for the safe option of enshrining the Jesus of our own making? Do we want to be coddled and safe and secure in our beliefs about his call to us or do we want to be challenged to, as the saying goes, to think outside the box.

Both throughout history and today, the church has faced this temptation of trying to mold Jesus into who we want in order to carry out our own personal prejudices and keep our beloved idols enshrined. I believe what we've found is that sooner or later because we have twisted Jesus' calling to us we are no longer relevant to so many people.

As the church, our mission is not only to strive to serve him but to serve others as he did. It really should be a simple choice but we have turned it into a hard one. It's as hard a choice between our own comfort of being busy for busy sake or doing the same old same old so we don't have to face difficult decisions and being faithful to who and what God has called us to do. It's just like Jesus' choices between taking the cushy job or moving on.

As I said last week we are being called to step out of our comfort zones into a new season of ministry. This is our chance to see what God desires to accomplish next in and through us. What awaits us if we step outside of our complacency and fear? As the theologian Walter Bruggeman wrote in his poem "Blown by God towards Newness" says:

The news is that God's wind is blowing, It may be a breeze that cools and comforts, It may be a gust that summons you to notice, It may be a storm that blows you

where you have never been before. Whatever the wind is in your life, Pay attention to it.”

Jesus paid attention to that wind. He rose from prayer knowing he was putting his life on the line despite his fears and trepidations. We know many times Jesus took the time to pray and to agonize over the choices he needed to make. We make a huge mistake believing this was easy for him.

We too are being called to move forward to carry out God’s mission and it isn’t going to be easy. Sometimes it might mean getting out of our own way to see what will happen. Just remember, God is in here in this church but most of all God is in here, our hearts and souls. Let each of us see what God intends for us personally and then corporately as the body of Christ. Look for the wind of God calling us for it is all around us and within us. Let us pray that our faithfulness will allow God’s wind to stir us up. Amen.