

Epiphany 5, February 4, 2018  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
*Mark 1:29-39*

St. Bartholomew's, the church John and I once attended, held an annual fall festival. The centerpiece of this event was homemade Brunswick Stew, available for sale by the quart. Stew making was a tradition cherished by a handful of devotees, including John, who worked four-hour shifts stirring stew in a large cauldron, set up in the parking lot. John loved taking the 2:00 am shift and just knew I would too. Well, let's just say I don't complain much when I am barely awake.

It was kind of fun - there was lively banter as we took turns stirring the pot, and folks shared stories about themselves and the life of the church during the unhurried hours of our shift. I tried to overlook the moths and mosquitos periodically dive bombing into the stew. No, I never ate any of it. John did! The light from the lanterns around the cauldron did not extend far. Woods encircled the parking lot, and the trees blended into the darkness of the night, so it was easy to forget they were even there.

On one occasion, a little after 4:00 am someone commented, "It is always darkest before the dawn." I marveled that it did look as if the darkness had closed in beyond our little circle of light. Eventually, the sky began to lighten ever so slightly, and the silhouettes of the surrounding trees emerged. At first only the vaguest outlines of tree shapes were discernable, but gradually more details appeared against a backdrop of indigo blue finally revealing a lacework of interwoven branches forming a dome over our heads. Sunrise was still an hour away, but the predawn light offered the first moments of clarity for the coming day.

"In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." This was the passage I contemplated the first time I engaged in Lectio

Divina, the Ignatian process of scriptural reflection, repeatedly reading a verse aloud and pondering the insights that emerge between each reading. I read the passage, again and again, with nary a remarkable insight. “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” And then it struck me - the darkness before the dawn and that morning at St. Bart’s. Jesus is at the very beginning of his ministry. A good deal of preparation has occurred in the first 30 verses of Mark’s rapidly unfolding narrative – John the Baptist has appeared, baptized Jesus, and been arrested. Jesus has been tempted in the wilderness, returned home, called four disciples, preached in the synagogue, cast out demons, cured the ill, and attracted a following. Now Jesus is about to take his message to other places, to live fully into his purpose to bring the Good News to God’s people.

The pace slows as this very human Jesus is perhaps feeling some anxiety and apprehension in the darkness of the early morning – a time when what lies ahead is difficult to discern. He seeks a place where he can be alone in prayer with his Father, a place where he can seek spiritual nurturing to more fully prepare himself for the road ahead.

It was a few weeks after beginning seminary when I first pondered this passage. It was a difficult time as I transitioned from a corporate career to graduate studies, and I sometimes questioned the wisdom of this decision and what the future would hold. My engagement with this text became a sacred moment, when it occurred to me that Jesus likely experienced anxiety in the face of uncertainty, just like I was, and that clarity would follow as the light of the morning emerged. The words held a mystical assurance that somehow Jesus and I were sharing these experiences together – I was not alone – Jesus was right there with me.

Today at St. Andrew's we find ourselves at the brink of a new day, but in this moment, this first Sunday without Abbott, we may feel we are in the dark hours before the dawn when the path ahead is not entirely clear.

During a recent gathering of Crossroads, Laura Boucher commented that even though Abbott was leaving, God is staying here with us, and that is an important point to remember. God's call is not limited to leading Abbott to California. God is calling us to something new as well – a prospect that should spark excitement and curiosity in us all.

For those of you not familiar with Crossroads, it is a group that came together over six months ago inspired by a sermon Abbott preached about her sense that the Spirit was calling this congregation to something new. We meet a couple of times each month after church for lunch, Bible study, and exploration. We have spent some focused time learning to look at familiar surroundings with discerning eyes and engaging more fully with the people we encounter. In hindsight, the organic way in which this group has coalesced feels like an intentional prelude to this time of transition in our church as we contemplate deeper relationship with the community around us. Our church was founded as a center of mission and ministry with our neighborhood, and many people here have felt called to revision how we live into this legacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Crossroads group is always eager to welcome new travelers to share this journey.

Crossroads is just one way we are called to discern the way forward. Simon's mother-in-law provides us with another example to inspire us. At the beginning of this Gospel reading we learn that this unnamed woman is in bed with a fever, a serious, life-threatening condition. Jesus takes her hand, and the fever leaves this woman. Her response to this encounter with Jesus is simple and swift - she gets up and begins to take care of Jesus and his disciples. By providing

them with a meal, food for the journey, she is participating in Jesus' ministry at its very beginning.

We too participate with Jesus whenever we reach out in love to one another. As we read in this Sunday's bulletin, "This is a time to let the abundant St. Andrew's charism of love shine in the ways we greet, connect, and care for each other. Need a hand? Ask for it. Have something to share? Offer it. Follow through on those inspirations to send a card, make a call, and meet for lunch that have been waiting for the perfect time to occur. The time is now. In ways both large and small, this is the time to strengthen those bonds of affection that already unite us, to draw in those who stand a bit to the side but don't want to, to remember that this is the place where we all belong. Jesus calls us. 'And they'll know we are Christians by our love.'"

It is indeed a new morning, where the emerging light of the Spirit offers us the first glimmer of the possibilities that surround us. While many of us may feel a bit disoriented for the moment, none of us is alone. We are living into this change and transition together, and Jesus remains ever-present in our midst, sharing in our sense of loss, and promising that new and unexpected joy awaits us in the dawn of a new day.