

## *GIVE ME A BREAK*

Luke 4.31-42

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### **LESSON: Luke 4.31-32, 40-42a**

Jesus went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee. He would teach there on the Sabbath. And Jesus' teaching made a great impression on them, because he spoke with authority ... At sunset, all who had people sick with a variety of diseases brought them to Jesus, and he laid hands on each and cured them. Demons departed from many, crying out as they did so, "You are the Firstborn of God!" Jesus rebuked them and forbade them to speak, for they knew who the Messiah was. The next morning, Jesus left the house and went to a lonely place.

First of all, I want to thank those – Cherry and Harriet and others – who are bringing a contemplative focus into our life together. It's important. And it is necessary in these days we find ourselves.

You may have noticed that there are two times of day mentioned in this story from the end of Luke 4: "At *sunset*, all who had people sick with a variety of diseases brought them to Jesus, and he laid hands on each and cured them," and "the next *morning*, Jesus left the house and went to a lonely place."

There's sunset and morning.

From my 21<sup>st</sup> century vantage point, this seems backward to me. The crowds should show up in the morning and Jesus should walk off into the sunset for his time away.

But the story seems to make it clear that it was the other way around.

And that got me wondering about why the crowds would show up at sunset.

In the interest of full disclosure, the story goes on to say that the crowds do track Jesus down the next morning and try to keep him from leaving. But there are no requests for healing and Jesus simply says that he has to move on to preach the good news in other towns as well. So, why the report about all this healing work done at sunset?

Perhaps, given that the story starts on the Sabbath, people were waiting for sunset when the Sabbath was over before they went gathering up all their friends in need of healing.

Although, even if that is the case, why didn't they just wait till the next morning?

You might remember that Luke sets the story of Jesus in a world where the vast majority of the population is living in oppression and poverty. In Luke's version of the birth of Jesus there are no foreign dignitaries who come to visit, that's Matthew. In Luke, it's shepherds who show up – the poorest of the poor – straight from their 24/7 watch over the flocks.

In Luke's world, the poor need some good news. They are up at the crack of dawn and spend every waking hour trying to feed themselves and their families. They can't just slip away for a morning or an afternoon to care for their beloved ones who are sick.

It was at sunset when they come.

And I bring this up because I want to be careful to recognize that when we talk about taking time away to be quiet and to be still and to renew, there are those in our time who are working 2 and 3 jobs to try to make a living for themselves and their families. And if there isn't healthcare, that only exacerbates the challenge of time and work.

If we believe that it is essential to the human condition to have times of rest and renewal, we have to remember that we live in – we participate

in – an economic system that makes taking time for rest and renewal almost impossible for some people.

Let's be careful not to let our commitment to contemplation and quiet simply be an expression of our privilege.

It was at sunset that that people came to do the work of healing.

And in the morning, Jesus left the house and went to a lonely place.

Those are the rhythms of well-being. Work and rest. Engagement and time away.

At this beginning of African-American History month, I've committed myself to pay attention, in particular, to what African-Americans have to say about the things we are considering.

Howard Thurman was a great preacher and teacher. He usually makes an appearance among us on Christmas Eve in his poem:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,*

*When the star in the sky is gone ...*

*The work of Christmas begins:*

*To find the lost,*

*To heal the broken,*

*To feed the hungry,*

*To release the prisoner,*

*To rebuild the nations,*

*To bring peace among people,*

*To make music in the heart.*

That's Howard Thurman. He was the first black dean of a predominately white university (Boston University) and, while he was ordained a Baptist, he was co-founder of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, claimed to be the first fully integrated, multi-cultural church in the U.S.

In 1936, he led an African-American delegation to meet Mohandas Gandhi which led to his book in 1949, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, a book that reportedly “laid the foundations for a nonviolent civil rights movement.”

It was sunset and Howard Thurman knew there was a lot of work to do.

But he also knew that there were those necessary “morning” moments. I am re-reading Howard Thurman’s *Meditations of the Heart*, published in 1953, just 3 years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Howard Thurman was a spiritual advisor to Dr. King and you can imagine him passing on this wisdom to Dr. King as his work began: *It is good to make an end of movement, Thurman says, to come to a point of rest, a place of pause. There is some strange magic in activity, in keeping at it, in continuing to be involved in many things that excite the mind and keep the hours swiftly passing. But it is a deadly magic; one is not wise to trust it with too much confidence.*

*The moment of pause, the point of rest, has its own magic ... [from another passage] There is no argument needed for the necessity of taking time out for being alone, for withdrawal, for being quiet without and still within. The sheer physical necessity is urgent because the body and the entire nervous system cry out for the healing waters of silence.*

You can imagine this influence in Dr. King’s life when, in that famous “I Have a Dream” speech, he says:

*Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred ... We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.*

Whatever physical force is necessary for the work of justice, there remains the force, the energy, that power that comes from tending our souls – a “soul force.”

At sunset, the crowds gathered for the work of healing. But in the morning, Jesus went away to a lonely place.

The great poet, Maya Angelou, has written an essay about her own practice called "A Day Away,"

*Once a year or so I give myself a day away. One the eve of my day of absence, I begin to unwrap the bonds which hold me in harness. I inform my housemates, my family and close friends that I will not be reachable for twenty-four hours; then I disengage the telephone. I turn the radio dial to an all-music station, preferably one which plays the soothing golden oldies. I sit for at least an hour in a very hot tub; then I lay out my clothes for my morning escape, and knowing that nothing will disturb me, I sleep the sleep of the just.*

*On the morning I wake naturally, for I will have set no clock, nor informed my body timepiece when it should alarm. I dress in comfortable shoes and casual clothes and leave my house going no place. If I am living in a city, I wander streets, window-shop, or gaze at buildings. I enter and leave public parks, libraries, the lobbies of skyscrapers, and movie houses. I stay in no place for very long.*

*On the getaway days I try for amnesia. I do not want to know my name, where I live, or how many dire responsibilities rest on my shoulders ... I want to forget for a while.*

And then she says:

*Each person deserves a day away in which no problems are confronted, no solutions searched for. Each of us needs to withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us. We need hours of aimless wandering or spates of time sitting on park benches, observing the mysterious world of ants and the canopy of trees.*

*If we step away for a time, we are not, as many may think and some will accuse, being irresponsible, but rather we are preparing ourselves to more ably perform our duties and discharge our obligations.*

*When I return home, I am always surprised to find some questions I sought to evade had been answered and some entanglements I had hoped to flee had become unraveled in my absence.*

*A day away acts as a spring tonic. It can dispel rancor, transform indecision, and renew the spirit.*

At sunset, the crowds came for healing. In the morning, Jesus left the house and went to a lonely place.

So come away with me for a moment.

Get comfortable. As best you can, relax your body.

Close your eyes if that helps you pay attention to your inner self.

Settle into that place in your memory or imagination that feels like peace.

If it's a beach, listen for the waves rolling in.

If it's a mountain path, listen for the breeze blowing through the trees.

If it's sitting by a fire, listen for the crackling of flames.

Whatever it is, be there. Right here. Right now.

While you are there, listen to the words of Psalm 46: "Be still and know that I am God."

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

And today if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

## NOTES

A brief biography of Howard Thurman can be found at [www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/howard\\_thurman.html](http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/howard_thurman.html). Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Beacon Press, 1953/1981), pp.27-29. *I Have A Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed The World* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), p.103. Maya Angelou, "A Day Away," *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now* (Random House, 1993), pp.137-139.