

Epiphany 5, February 4, 2024

MARK 1:29–39. (EHV)

They left the synagogue and went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was lying in bed, sick with a fever. Without delay they told Jesus about her. He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, when the sun had set, the people kept bringing to him all who were sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door. He healed many people who were sick with various diseases and drove out many demons. But he did not allow the demons to speak, because they knew who he was. Jesus got up early in the morning, while it was still dark, and went out. He withdrew to a solitary place and was praying there. Simon and his companions searched for him, and, when they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is looking for you!" He told them, "Let's go somewhere else, to the neighboring villages, so that I can preach there too. In fact, that is why I have come." Then he went throughout the whole region of Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

What are your nights like, when you're lying there in the darkness?

Does your mind replay past scenes from your life that you wish would have turned out differently?

Do you agonize over what you didn't get done or what still needs to be done?

Do you worry about the future of your family?

Do you have trouble sleeping because of physical pain, or the psychological pain of a recent diagnosis?

Do you think about life's end and what people will think and say about you when you're gone?

Job once described his nights this way: "When I lie down I think, 'How long before I get up?' The night drags on, and I toss till dawn."

What are *your* nights like, when you're lying there in the darkness?

Our Gospel tells us about some other people who didn't look forward to the darkness. Simon Peter's mother-in-law had a fever, and if there's anything worse than a fever, it's a fever at night. When everyone else seems to be sound asleep but you. When those who tended to you during the day are no longer available and darkness is your only companion. When you can't even spend your sleepless hours thinking pleasant thoughts or enjoying happy memories. When, even if you do get a few hours of sleep, your mind messes with you while you do, and you wake up feeling no better than before.

We're told about sick people—many people with various diseases, many demon-possessed people. Between them all, imagine the strange, unsettling thoughts, dreams, and visions that passed through their minds at night, in the darkness, on a regular basis. Especially for those with terminal illnesses or sexually transmitted diseases, imagine the sleepless hours spent wallowing in self-pity or regret or both. And just imagine what the nights must have been like for the demon-possessed, when Satan and his minions, who love the darkness, could torment them physically and spiritually, could make them at the same time long for death while dreading death, with neither life nor death holding any promise of relief.

And then there is everyone else. We're not told specifically about them, but we're told elsewhere in the Bible that those who get drunk, get drunk at night. They get drunk because they're not happy, and after they get drunk they go to bed in a stupor and wake up less happy than they were before. We're told about fruitless deeds of darkness like stealing or adultery in any of its forms. We're told that it's shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in the dark. And even if we head straight to bed at night, David tells us about the restless and guilty thoughts that can plague even the consciences and minds of believers.

But this night was different. During the day, as we heard last week, Jesus had gone to the synagogue with everyone else. And there he had taught. He had taught the punishment of sin. He had taught repentance from sin. He had taught forgiveness of sin.

And the devil didn't like it. So he sent one of his minions who was possessing a man into the synagogue to interrupt Jesus's teaching. But Jesus rebuked the demon and cast him out. He revealed the evil of Satan and the goodness of God. Furthermore, he revealed *himself* as God, a merciful God who has compassion even on those standing against him, a powerful God who has power even over evil spirits.

Now the people were only allowed to work so much and to walk so far on the Sabbath. They could only walk the distance from their house to the synagogue and back. And so when it came time to leave many of them no doubt timed their exit carefully to correspond with Jesus's exit. They cast glances over their shoulder to see where Jesus was going. They saw him come out with Simon and Andrew. "Isn't Simon's mother-in-law sick?" a few of them might have asked. And they went home. And they talked. And they thought.

"I wonder if Jesus is healing Simon's mother-in-law? He did cast out that demon."

"I wonder what Jesus could do for Grandma? He cast out that demon after all."

"I wonder if Jesus could heal Uncle Benjamin of his paralysis? He spoke so kindly in the synagogue and was so merciful to that demon-possessed man."

"Do you think he could be the Messiah?"

And one by one, house by house, a strange phenomenon took place. A whole city full of people began to look forward to the darkness. They began to look forward to when their day of rest would end and the new week of work would begin. The Jewish day began at sunset, and so the Sabbath Day ended at sunset. Certainly it wouldn't hurt to go visit Simon and his family and see Jesus after then, would it?

So they waited. And waited. And then:

"That evening, when the sun had set, the people kept bringing to him all who were sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door. He healed many people who were sick with various diseases and drove out many demons. But he did not allow the demons to speak, because they knew who he was."

It was sunset, the beginning of night, and it was like a new day had just begun. And it had. Jesus was there. The day of forgiveness, the day of comfort, the day of healing, the day of peace had begun. No more dreading the darkness. No more tossing and turning until dawn. How could they? Jesus was with them, and he had power over all the powers of darkness.

Not only did they enjoy the night while they were face to face with Jesus, but when they went home, their thoughts could only revolve around this man, this God-man.

“Remember when he healed Grandpa?”

“Uncle Ben, what was it like when you stood up on your own for the first time?”

“Remember how Simon’s mother-in-law greeted us at the door? Remember how she served us the entire time?”

And when they finally went to bed and couldn’t talk to each other any more, their minds were filled with thoughts of Jesus. Their eyes closed in peace, because Jesus was in their midst—Jesus, the light in the darkness.

If anyone had a right to a good night’s rest that night, it was Jesus. He had spent a good chunk of the day teaching and then, when nightfall came, he first had his work truly cut out for him. You wouldn’t blame him if he collapsed exhausted on his bed and didn’t let anyone wake him or bother him until he was good and ready.

But no one had to wake him or bother him. “Jesus got up early in the morning, while it was still dark, and went out. He withdrew to a solitary place and was praying there.” If Satan thought he at least was lord of the night, he had another thought coming. First the beginning of his night was spoiled when Jesus healed and comforted all those people and didn’t even let his minions speak. Now the end of his night is ruined when Jesus, whose life and mission is the most important human life and mission on earth, gets up while it’s still dark and goes off to pray. And if God always answers the prayers of all believers, it wasn’t looking good for Satan when God’s own Son began to pray in the dark.

And what do you think he prayed?

“Father, remember when you gave me power to heal that boy’s grandfather? Father, remember when Benjamin stood up on his own feet for the first time? Father, wasn’t it beautiful how Simon’s mother-in-law didn’t draw any attention to herself, but simply and quietly went about serving and helping me and everyone else who was there? Father, wasn’t it great how many of those I didn’t get to still went away cheered and gladdened in their hearts because they knew that you loved and forgave them? That you were not against them, but on their side, even though they still had their illness?

“Father, I love to serve you by doing good to the humans you have created. I look forward to serving you by healing them of their worst disease—sin. I look forward to triumphing over the devil and all his works and ways so that the people you love so dearly might never have to fear the darkness or the night again. Give me the strength to do it, Father.”

And he got up from his knees and prayer and joined Simon and the others, and went off to make the nights just like the days for a whole bunch of other villages too, including Winner, including for you and for me.

What are your nights like, when you’re lying there in the darkness? With Jesus, they’re just like the days, because he is the light in the darkness, in *all* darkness. With Jesus and his word, someday there will only be light and day—one eternal day face to face with Jesus. Amen.