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Pastor Ellis White
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Instagram Jesus: Resisting the Squeeze

Mark 1:29-39

There's something about waiting that forces us to slow down. I know you can all relate. You're waiting for that promotion. Or that trip. Or that relationship. Or the snow to melt. Or the kids to go back to school! Or... that green card. It feels like every couple of days someone asks me, "Ellis, any word on that green card yet?"

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Ellis and I am the Pastor of Weekend Services here at Chapel Hill. Originally I am from the UK and for the last 8 years we have been slowly working our way through the immigration process towards getting what is known as a green card, or more technically, a Permanent Resident Card. This magic card allows you the privilege of staying in the US permanently, without having to reapply for a visa ever again.

Well, Chapel Hill, I want to show you something. Yes, last Tuesday FedEx delivered this magic card to yours truly! Thank you for all your prayers, support and love over this long process, but it is finally over! My wife and I both are now permanent residents of the United States! We will never have to renew or reapply for a visa ever again! And if you're wondering about our kids, they were born here so they are US Citizens. So we are all safe!

We're closing out our Instagram Jesus series today. Over the last few weeks we've been looking at the opening chapters of Mark's gospel—the account of Jesus' life written by a man named Mark. And we've seen how fast paced it has been. As Pastor Mark pointed out that word "immediately" crops up all over the place—8 times in the first chapter!

Mark's gospel honestly makes me think of Instagram stories. Insta-stories allow you to post photos or short videos that only remain visible for 24-hours. And when you watch Insta-stories, you just tap on the right hand side of the screen to go from story to story. Like this:

And this is how Mark's gospel has felt. It's fast-paced. Tap, tap, tap, swipe, tap, tap. It's action packed. Barely enough time to take it in. Immediately, immediately, immediately. Let me read you the next few verses so you can see it:

"And immediately [Jesus] left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

"That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons.

"And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him."

(Mark 1:28-34 ESV)

It's tap, tap, tap, swipe, tap. It's one thing to another to another. And this was on the Sabbath! But then, all of a sudden as we keep reading, for just a few verses, the pace changes. It just like you can do with Insta-stories.

You see if you hold you thumb down you can pause the video, and slow it all down, but only as long as you hold your thumb down. As soon as you pick you thumb up again, you're back to the fast paced action. It's tap, tap, tap, swipe, tap, tap, hold... (maybe even grab a screen shot if you can get all your fingers in the right place), and then release, tap, tap, swipe, tap, tap...

And this is what happens next in Mark. Let me keep reading:

"And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, [Jesus] departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed."

(Mark 1:35 ESV)

For one moment, Jesus pauses. It's like he holds his thumb down on the Insta-story, and just stops for a second. All the pace, all that is happening—the healings, the preaching, the sick, the lame, the calling of disciples, the casting out of demons, the pace, suddenly slows down...

It's most interesting to me when this occurs during the week. You see the context of this is right after a significant day of ministry for Jesus on the Sabbath. Now the Sabbath is a day of rest, and I believe the Sabbath is incredibly important for many reasons. But... I know that the Sabbath, which we remember on Sundays, can be far from restful for someone who works in ministry.

Some weekends I can understand how Jesus might have felt at the end of that Sabbath day. You've poured yourself out in preaching and leading and ministering to people and you're just wiped. And for every preacher and worship leader, then comes the worst day of the week—Monday. You may never have experienced this, but Monday's can be the most depressing and disheartening days. You wake up and you're still tired. Then your mind immediately goes back to yesterday, and you start to analyze and critique everything you did. Should I have picked that song? Should I really have used that story? What if no one is listening to me? And if you're not careful, as a minister, Monday mornings can quickly become this downward spiral into depression.

And you all probably know what this feels like in different ways. You've been working long hours all week at work and then Saturday hits, and you sink into a depression—I saw my dad go through this for years. Or you've been in a very intense season of giving care to someone, either a child, or an elderly parent, or a sick spouse and then you suddenly get a break—and then you get sick. You've had a very hard semester or quarter at school, you've crammed for finals and then it's vacation and, bam, you can't bring yourself to do anything except social media scrolling and Netflix binges, and the more you do it, the more depressed you feel. We all know what this is like.

So, it's fascinating to me, that after an incredibly intense day of ministry for Jesus, where he has taught in the Synagogue, exorcised a demon in front of the whole congregation, gone for lunch at Simon's house only to find his mother has a fever so Jesus heals her, to then step outside the door at sunset, and find that everyone now wants to bring their mother and brother and daughter and dog to Jesus to be healed... It's fascinating to me, that after this unbelievably intense day of ministry, Jesus chooses to get up before everyone else, even before the sun has risen, and go off by himself to pray.

I tell you, it's the last thing I want to do on a Monday morning is get up early and go off by myself. It's the last thing you want to do on vacation when you've had a hard season. Or on a Saturday after an intense week. Because we all want to do the same thing. What's that? Sleep! Yes, we all want to sleep in as long as

we can, which for some people is past noon, and for others of us with kids is 6:45am, if you're lucky. And yet, Jesus chooses to get up early, before sunrise, take himself to a desolate place and pray. Why?

A few weeks ago we heard Pastor Mark talk about how Jesus, immediately after this huge spiritual high of being baptized and the clouds opening, and the Spirit of God descending, and God's voice saying, "This is my beloved Son. I'm proud of you." Immediately after this, the Spirit of God drove Jesus into the wilderness. And we find out he spent 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and battling temptation. Well that word for wilderness, *erēmos*,

back in that story a few verses earlier, is the exact same word for desolate used to describe where Jesus went before sunrise to pray. Jesus went to a wilderness place, an *erēmos* place, to pray before sunrise.

It's almost as if Mark, who is writing, is trying to tell us that Jesus, after this intense day of ministry, chooses, not only to get up early and go pray, but he chooses to go back to the place of his greatest temptation, his *erēmos*, and in that place regain his strength.

Doesn't that seem a little weird? Going back to the place where you felt weakest, in order to regain strength. Isn't that a little counter-intuitive, a little upside-down? And doesn't that ring a few bells? "When I am weak, then I am strong." "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit."

You know that place you looked upon as your lowest point, your most desperate point, the point where you felt you couldn't go on, your *erēmos*... When you get through it, and you reflect back... I don't know if that has ever happened to you, but when you look back you go: "I felt closer to God in that moment than I have ever felt since." It was in that lowest moment, in that *erēmos* place, that God met you in a way that was so powerful, so unique, and so real, that you have never again felt his presence in the same way.

This is the first point I want to make:

1. The wilderness breeds closeness

When we got stuck in England for two months because our visa was denied, it sucked. It was definitely an *erēmos*. But when I look back on my life, I look back to those riverside walks and runs I would take, to the journaling I did, to the relationships I developed, to the words people spoke to me, and I go: I was closer to God in that moment than I have felt since. And I wonder if the same is true for you? When you look back on your cancer, or your divorce, or your job loss... when you reflect back on those times, so often, in the midst of the hurt and the pain, we find that God was more present to us than we've known since.

And Jesus, in this passage, chooses, when he is at his highest moment of success up to this point... When he has the whole town coming to him to be healed... When his fame is spreading everywhere throughout the whole region... When he is about to break into the big time... At this point, when he is, in the world's eyes, at his strongest, Jesus chooses to go back to the weak place. He chooses the wilderness.

And it doesn't make sense to the world. It doesn't even make sense to the disciples. The disciples, who I guarantee you got up after sunrise, although the passage doesn't say it, they start gathering for breakfast and they're starting to reflect on yesterday. Did you see that lame man walk? Did you see that blind woman see? Did you see that demoniac in his right mind? And then they probably started to say things like: "This Jesus is the real deal. He's got something we've never seen before."

And then, maybe, I think, they start to dream about the potential. And you know, four of these guys are fisherman—they're businessmen. And they start to think: we could really scale this thing. Maybe they even start to think about how they monetize the whole thing. Maybe they think we need a marketing campaign, maybe a social media campaign: #TheMessiahIsHere

And then, someone knocks at the door and says, "Hey! Where's Jesus? We've got 30 people out here who want to meet him." And the disciples realize they don't know where Jesus is. You see while they were all busy figuring out how to make this thing a worldly success, Jesus was back in his erēmos, bringing himself back to the point of worldly weakness.

Because Jesus realized something very, very, significant: success clouds judgment. When we are successful, it so often clouds our ability to make the right decisions. Success squeezes the strategy until it slips. We lose focus on what we've been called to do, and start doing what makes people like us. Jesus knew that if he is to remain focussed on his mission, on his purpose, he must resist the squeeze, he must retreat, he must return to his wilderness, his erēmos, because it was in that place, that everything was clarified.

So Jesus is out in his wilderness place, but Simon and the others have no idea where he is, so they start looking for him. This is what we read next:

"And Simon and those who were with him searched for [Jesus], and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." And [Jesus] said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.""

(Mark 1:36–38 ESV)

Simon and his friends find Jesus and tell him: "Everyone is looking for you. The whole city is ready for your breakout ministry." And what does Jesus do? Go somewhere else. What? Why? Because Jesus isn't there to draw a crowd. He isn't there to get Instagram followers. For Jesus, the mission of seeking and saving the lost is the goal. And his mission has him going on to other towns, not just that one. These people have heard his message and seen his power. Now Jesus has more people to preach to. That's his mission. To leave the 99 to find the 1.

And I believe that when Jesus took himself off to that wilderness place, that erēmos, that he was able, through spending time with his heavenly Father to center himself again on what was important. On what his call was. On what he was being tasked with doing. The wilderness breeds clarity. That's the second point I want to make:

2. The wilderness breeds clarity

I can certainly attest that in my erēmos, in my two months in England, not only did I experience God's presence and power in a profound way, but I also received a significant amount of clarity over what was important.

As I looked at the church in the UK, which in many respects is only a decade or two ahead of the American church, I saw an institution that was falling apart. And as I dug into why that was, I realized it was because the church insisted on using old methods which no longer worked in a new culture. And I walked away from that time, knowing with a huge amount of clarity, that the US church was on the brink of the same fallout. That if the US church continued to use old methods, they would face the same consequences.

And when we got sent by God back to the US, I knew that He was setting before me this mission: to help create new wineskins into which God would pour his new wine. I didn't know what that would look like, but

as God often does, he was speaking the same thing to the rest of our leadership team at the same time. We came to a mutual sense of clarity, and a greater degree of unity than ever before about where we needed to lead this church.

Success clouds judgment. The wilderness breeds clarity. Jesus intentionally chose the wilderness place, early in the morning, before sunrise, because he knew it would give him the clarity he needed to take the next steps he needed to take.

The wilderness breeds closeness and the wilderness breeds clarity. And I know some of you are in the wilderness right now, and this might be a hard message to hear. You might be going through something that is unbelievably painful, and you can't possibly understand how this could be true. And yet I think of one dad of preschool aged kids in this church who is going through cancer right now. He posted on Facebook last month the following:

"When I am healed from cancer, I look forward to one day sharing my powerful testimony that cancer was one of the best things that happened to me because it allowed God to show me that I must reconcile broken relationships by making amends with people who I have hurt or who I must forgive as a result of hurting me ... God healed me from my anger and resentment towards others, and cancer provided a means for God to transform me in body, mind and spirit!"

Whatever you might be going through, I know God is going to use it to bring you clarity, just like he is bringing this young dad, and closeness in relationship to God, just like this young dad is experiencing.

And for the rest of us, who don't feel like we're in a wilderness place, Jesus leaves us an example, and this is my third point:

3. Choose the wilderness

Life is fast paced. It is full of ups and downs. Successes and failures. But Jesus gives us an example which we can follow. That no matter what is going on, we can choose to get up early, before the sunrise, take ourselves to a wilderness place, and meet with our Father in heaven.

Many of you already do this, I know. You have discipline of waking up in the morning and sitting down to read your Bible and pray. Many of you have been doing it for a lifetime, but I know that many of us struggle with this. And I know that I go through seasons of doing it and not doing it. But I want to encourage you if you are struggling or if you've never done it to try.

We produce daily devotional guides to accompany our peaching, written by people in our own congregation. All you have to do is download the app on your phone and click on Connect. Then every morning, instead of doing the social media scroll, do the devotional scroll. Take some time to read and pray.

If you want to take it up a step, try reading the Bible in a year. For over a year now, I've been reading the Bible every day using the Bible In One Year app from Alpha. It's incredible. There's passages from different parts of the Bible so you aren't stuck in Leviticus alone for days on end, and you get amazing commentary on the passages every day from Nicky Gumbel.

Or, do your own thing. I know that for a long season when we had very little kids, Rachel had to get creative with her wilderness time. She would find some space at some point in the day—nap time or feeding time—when she could grab 10 mins to read a short devotional or the Bible in One Year app. But she made the time.

And if you want my number one tip on getting up early to spend time with God... here it is... this will rock your world: set two alarms. One for waking up, and even more importantly, one for going to bed. Decide in advance what time you're going to bed and set an alarm for it. It will change your life.

And there is no time like the present. So we're going to close our service by doing that right now. The musicians are going to come up, and I want use to take a moment and choose the wilderness. Choose to go mentally, emotionally, spiritually, to that place where we feel weak. For some of you, you're living it, you don't have to go through this thought exercise. But for others, you're gonna need to choose to go there right now.

So I want to invite you all to bow your heads, and close your eyes. And while the music quietly plays, I want you to invite God to meet you where you are. And in particular, I want you to begin to imagine placing in front of you the situations in your life where you feel at your weakest, where you feel most in the wilderness. Maybe it's your job. Your family. Your marriage. Discipling your grandkids. Your sickness. Maybe it's your desire to have this daily time with the Lord, which you've never done before, or struggled with. And I want you to invite God to meet you in that situation. I believe the wilderness breeds closeness and God will meet us in those places... And I want you to invite God to help you know what you need to do. The wilderness breeds clarity, so let's ask for clarity...