



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, February 5, 2012
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock
on
Saint Mark 1:29-39
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JESUS AT A CROSSROADS

Before I tackle today's gospel, I would ask that you keep one thing in your mind and that is this: after Jesus was baptized he was driven into the desert where he was tempted by Satan. And when he had resisted those temptations, Luke tells us that the devil departed from him until a more opportune time.

In the gospel of Mark, immediately after his temptation in the desert, Jesus calls his disciples, and then enters the synagogue in Capernaum. He teaches with an authority that astonishes the hearers; he casts out a demon from a man possessed. This is what the people said, "What is this? What new doctrine is this?" They were amazed at Jesus' authority, which was unlike any teaching they had ever heard or seen. Last week's gospel ended with this, "And immediately his fame spread."

Today's gospel picks up as Jesus and his disciples leave the synagogue. They go from there to Peter's house for lunch. When they arrive they sit talking until someone mentions that Peter's mother-in-law is sick. Jesus goes to her and he heals her. Made well, she begins to take care of her guests. This is all very interesting, but while this is happening, something else is happening in homes all over town.

All those people at synagogue that morning who heard Jesus speak and saw him act with authority have themselves gone home from church and they're telling everyone everywhere what they have seen and heard. Now everyone with a sick wife, a possessed friend, a lame parent, an ailing child, have been sitting at home waiting and waiting for the sun to go down. And all the while they must be wondering; is this true? Did he really do that? Can anyone do that? Is this too good to be true? Can Jesus help me? Will Jesus help me? And the sun does set and with it the Mosaic laws pertaining to the carrying of burdens are set aside and the people begin to carry their burdens to Jesus. Mark says that the whole city was gathered together at Peter's door. And late into the night Jesus did heal them; he healed them of their diseases and their infirmities; he made them whole; he silenced their demons. And when that was all done, he slipped off to a lonely place and had a talk with his Father.

While Jesus is praying, his disciples are talking with the townsfolk. And Peter and the others seek out and find Jesus away somewhere by himself. And when they find him, you can imagine the many veiled accusations behind their statement, "Everyone is looking for you." "Why are you here? Why aren't you where they want you to be?" "Why aren't you where we want you to be?" His fame had spread, why isn't he in town capitalizing on it?

The Celtic fathers say that whenever you come to a crossroads, always make the sign of the cross, because there you meet God and the Devil. Jesus had come out of near total obscurity to astonish large crowds and now his name was on every lip, he was on everyone's mind and they were looking for him. Jesus was at the cross roads. Is this the opportune time the devil had hoped for?

The temptations of temporal power, glory, and praise are Jesus' for the taking. All he has to do is return with his disciples to Capernaum and he may have whatever he might desire. As the people exclaim and search, what does Satan whisper into Jesus' ear? "Stay where you are. Look at all the good you've done. Your Father must be well pleased. Jerusalem can wait. The cross can wait." The battle is on. The enemy has engaged, and Jesus' cry must have been: "Retreat!"

When I was a boy and used to play army, we used to yell retreat whenever our side was beaten. And we always had it wrong. Retreat is the term that describes the action of an army falling back to rest and regroup so that it might resume an attack with renewed strength. Surrender is what you do when you're beat. In a lonely place, we find Jesus retreating. The acclaim of the people and the spreading fame were the enemy's weapon. And so Jesus retreats from that scene to a place where he can rest, a quiet space where he can have a word with his Father.

If Jesus was going to do the will of his Father on earth, he needed to commune with the mind of his father in heaven. Throughout his life, we find Jesus turning to God in prayer. He prayed when he healed, he prayed at the tomb of his friend, he prayed with his disciples, in the street, in the synagogue, on the sea, in the mountains, in houses, at supper, in a garden, on the cross. And today we see that in the face of adoring crowds, and growing fame, he stands in a quiet place and asks his Father, "What would you have me to do?"

So, when his disciples come to him saying, "Let's go back to town, they love us here." Jesus says, "No, Let's go to the next town and preach there, that's why I came out." Jesus came out to do the will of the one who sent him. And though he lived wandering from town to town, with no place to lay his head, he made in himself and in his embrace of the cross a home for everyone that staggers under burdens too great for them to carry, or beset by devils that threaten to tear them apart, or sins that are too intolerable to bear.

A holy man once taught me that when you approach the altar, you draw near to Jesus. Some, if not many of you, have made your way to church today weighed down with a load of worry, sickness and fear. For whatever reason you passed through the church doors to find a body of people oriented towards one man, Jesus Christ. How can that man bear any more of what we lay in those arms? Well, he can't if we only want to see him as a Capernaum wonderworker. But let him go on to Jerusalem. Let him embrace the cross. Let him bear the sins of the world. Let him bear your sins in his own body. When you approach the altar, when you approach Jesus; lay your burdens upon him and do not seek to take them up again. For on a certain day long ago, at a cross roads, when Jesus could have chosen the smallness of our own purposes and praises, he chose God's greater purpose, and became healer and redeemer of us all.