

## Jesus' Pre-game ritual: Prayer

Mark 1:35-42

August 27, 2017

How much fun has it been these past couple weeks, watching the Fairfield American Little League team make it to the World Series,

and do so amazingly well!

I know a bunch of you were down at Sherman Green on Friday to welcome them home from Williamsport; they're our hometown celebrities now.

So of course we're all doing what you do with celebrities – that is, figure out how you're personally connected.

Like “well, my neighbor's friend's daughter was at a birthday party for one of those boys.”

So, this is where I say “well, one of those boys was baptized here.”

Maybe more than one, I better check the records.

It's all a lot of fun – they were a joy to watch, and they more than deserve to be heroes of the summer, celebrities of the fall.

Part of their celebrity was, of course, being interviewed by reporters, from their hometown paper to the New York Times to ESPN.

And one of those questions that reporters love to ask the players is do you have pre-game rituals, what do you do to psych yourself up?

So, one of the kids said he always has to have Cocoa Puffs for breakfast on gameday, which turned out to be challenging when the Williamsport sports complex didn't stock them – his mom had to go on a supermarket search.

And another of the kids talked about how he always has to watch internet memes before the game, you know – things like grumpy cat pictures with funny captions.

On another team, there was a player who has to have 8 Jolly Ranchers – you know, those little hard candies – watermelon flavor. 8 exactly.

Whatever pre-game ritual these boys are doing now, they may just find themselves doing it forever –

Derek Jeter in his Little League days, always had to find his mom in the stands, make eye contact and nod to her before the first pitch – and he kept that ritual going right up until they retired #2.

One of the many reasons moms like me loved Derek.

The scripture Jason read to you earlier, the Jesus story that he told you, it's a story about **Jesus'** pregame ritual.

It really is.

This scripture passage tells you what Jesus had to do before every big game, before every big day –

and of course, with Jesus, every day was a big day.

Here it is again, just in case you missed it:

Gospel of Mark, chapter 1:

In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

In the morning, Jesus got up, went out to a quiet place with no one else around, and he **prayed**.

There it is – Jesus' pre-game ritual.

The next part is kinda funny – it says that the disciples woke up and started were hunting all over for him.

And when they found him, it says, they said to him, **“Everyone is searching for you.”**

You can just hear the annoyance in their voices.

Not a lot of sympathy for the pregame ritual.

What do you mean, it has to be EIGHT jolly ranchers and they have to be watermelon.

What do you mean, you have to go off by yourself and pray.

And Jesus sighs – well, it doesn't say that, but I bet he did –  
Jesus sighs and gets up from his praying and says,  
“Well, Let us go on to the neighboring town, so that I may proclaim God's  
message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”  
In other words – *showtime*.  
Let's go, boys. I've got work to do, preaching to do, healing to do.

So here's what's striking to me, and probably to you, too.  
Even the Son of God needed to find time for prayer.  
Even the man described later as very God of very God,  
one in being with the Creator,  
the very presence of God among us –  
Jesus needed to make time for prayer every day.  
Every single day.  
So that kind of says to me, ohhh –  
Jesus Christ himself needed to check in with God?  
Then Lord knows – I mean really, Lord knows I need to.

But why?  
Why would the Messiah need to pray?

Honestly, for the same reason that any of us need to pray,  
all of us need to pray – to keep ourselves connected with the source of all  
goodness,  
to keep ourselves in conversation with the one who created Love, who is Love.  
To be reminded of who we are, of whose we are.

I actually had one of my best discussions about this with a taxi driver in Abu  
Dhabi.

It was a couple years ago; my daughter Brigitta was working there,  
and I stopped off to visit her on our way back from the India mission trip.  
On my last day, she headed off to work

and I got in a cab with a friendly driver named Mohammed to head to the Dubai airport.

He was chatty, wanted to know where I was from –

I said “near New York”, which always works better than saying Connecticut.

“Oh, New York!” he said, “it must be so beautiful, and the roads, they must be so fast and smooth.”

I thought about the Van Wyck expressway, and assured him that the road to Dubai was looking pretty good.

And then he asked what I did, and I told him I pastored a church.

He was fascinated. And excited.

I love God too, he said. I love praying to God.

I always know that God is with me. It gives me courage.

I like your religion and I like my religion,

I think we should have churches everywhere and mosques everywhere, and, he said, plenty of nightclubs. I like nightclubs.

We talked and talked -- it was an hour-long ride.

As we neared the Dubai airport,

I was looking in awe at the sights of the city,

and then I saw a sign for the Mall of the Emirates.

“Hey, isn't that where they have that indoor ski slope?” I said.

“We'll stop there!” said Mohammed, and he crossed three lanes of traffic to get onto the exit ramp.

I hadn't really meant that we should *stop*, I was just making conversation, but we pulled into the parking garage, and Mohammed opened my door for me.

“This is good,” he said, “You can see the skiing. And I can pray. It's time for me to pray again.”

So I watched people slipping and sliding down an indoor ski slope, and Mohammed went off to find the prayer room in the mall.

Eventually he came back, smiling.

So, he said, you have seen the skiing, and I have done my praying, and now we go to the airport.

His pleasure in having found time for his prayer reminded me of a conversation I'd had at an interfaith event a while back, with the Muslim woman I sat next to.

"I love our prayer," she said. "I love that, five times a day, no matter where you are, no matter what you're doing, you pause and you kneel before your God, and you pray.

"I love it," she said, "it makes me feel like I'm always connected to God. And sometimes when my thoughts are going the wrong way, or I'm feeling unhappy with someone, then comes the time to pray, and I remember whose thoughts I should be thinking."

Prayer like that – prayer that becomes part of each day, means that we live in connection with the God of all loev.

Rev. Jana Childers, a clergywoman and teacher, preached a sermon on prayer which I heard long ago, and still remember. She told a story in that sermon about her friend Lucy, who, like too many women we know, was taken by cancer too young. Lucy, she said, never stopped praying.

"In the last months of her earthly life," Rev. Childers said, "Lucy's prayers were filled with a deep sense of God's presence, a web of prayer that sustained Lucy until the morning when her feet were lifted off the path and she was ushered through that door.

Then Rev. Childers said this:

"In the lives of all the prayer warriors I have known, there is heartbreak and loss – but there is not much despair. There is instead an invisible web that buoys them up, and ultimately carries them home.

What did Lucy get for all her praying?

Did she see an angel, or was she offered a sign in the heavens?

No, what Lucy got was what we all get. She got God.

God's own presence is the answer to every prayer –  
the answer that surpasses anything we could ask for.”

She got God.

What my taxi driver friend got,

What Jesus in his quiet pregame ritual got –

what we each can get when we take ourselves into a place of prayer.

She got God: God's presence is the answer to every prayer.

What we do here on Sundays is our pregame ritual.

We gather in this place to do exactly what Jesus did in the quiet early morning  
hours, when he slipped away from his friends.

We gather to pray ourselves into the presence of God.

We gather to get God.

The game that we're getting ready for is everything that comes our way from  
Monday to Saturday. Here, we get ourselves ready.

And today we **have** prayed.

We have sung Sweet Hour of Prayer.

We have prayed for forgiveness, we have been assured of it.

We have asked God to bless Jack and Helen and Annie in all their days to come.

We have said “Our Father who art in heaven ... give us our daily bread.”

Jodi sang for us the prayer of St Francis – make me an instrument of your  
peace, God.

We have asked God that our gifts might bring help to the hurting and peace to  
this world.

And before I began speaking,

Fiona and Reyes (Ray-ess) sang this:

Let this be our prayer, when we lose our way –

Lead us to a place, Lord, Guide us with your grace.

We have prayed our way through this hour –

like Jesus, we have taken ourselves away from the world just for this time,

and put ourselves into the presence of God.  
We have made ourselves ready here,  
ready to go out, to love, to listen, to care, to hope, to dare, to be strong.

I want to close by telling you about something that I shared in this past  
Wednesday, something a number of us shared in.

On Wednesday evening, at Congregation Beth El here in Fairfield,  
we gathered together, hundreds of us from different faiths,  
to be in prayer.

It was a prayer service against racism and hate,  
and so it was a prayer service filled with love.

And for an hour and a half, all we did was put ourselves into the presence of  
God.

It was our pregame ritual for the work that we all are called to do:  
the work of loving, hoping, caring.

We closed our time of prayer by singing **this** prayer,  
full-throated and joyful:

Olam Chesed Yibaneh (*oh-lum Hess-id Yib-a-nay*) –  
God will build this world from love.

And we left there, all of us, ready.

Just as Jesus long ago got up from his knees,  
smiled at the friends who'd been searching for him everywhere,  
and then said "Let's go. I have work to do."

We too have work to do.

So may we always remember what needs to come first:  
connecting ourselves to the source of all Love,  
and praying ourselves into the presence of God.

Let's stand and sing our closing hymn,  
an old hymn of faith and prayer and hope –  
Blessed Assurance – hymn #543.