

Experiencing God: Hanging Out With Jesus

Psalm 84
Mark 4:26-34

July 8, 2018
Faith Community

A thousand years ago or so I lived in Pittsburgh for a short while. While I wasn't there for long, I did notice something that, ever since, has been a model for me of contemporary life.

Every now and then, back in the early seventies, people would either wake up in the morning or come home after work or school and find something very disturbing.

Sometimes it was a driveway that not only had a new crack, but the whole thing on one side of said crack was a few inches lower than it had previously been, or in some cases three or four feet lower. Or, if they had a swimming pool they'd look out their back window and see that the deep end had become much deeper and the water was gone. Sometimes entire houses had literally cracked in two.

Even when this happened to just one home, the whole neighborhood would be put on watch. It was a heartbreaking thing, and a time of great anxiety for entire communities.

It turned out the culprit was something called mine subsidence. Coal was big in Pennsylvania, and either deep mining or strip-mining from an earlier day, usually decades earlier, was settling or filling in, and foundations were literally broken in the process, and lives were forever impacted.

Usually there was little or no warning. Just like that, it appeared, kind of like the sinkholes we hear about these days. And I thought, what a great image for life itself.

On the surface we can look composed and well heeled, but in the deep inner reaches of our lives, where no one else goes, there's an empty place. We may have even fooled ourselves about it, but sooner or later reality comes home to roost, and cracks begin to appear in even the most carefully constructed exterior. If we're wise, we see the stress fractures when they occur and take action. If we're not wise, we try to keep going or push even harder; cracks turn into breaks, the foundation is lost, and a life collapses on itself.

All those years it looked good on the outside, but there was nothing to hold it up. Of course there's nothing sinister

about this. We mean well, we want to do well, but somewhere along the way we started to pay more attention to external issues and less to foundational matters.

Some of you remember one of the characters played by the comedian Billy Crystal: Fernando, the 'you look marvelous' guy. Oftentimes, when he wrapped up his routine, Fernando would say, "Remember, it is always better to look good than to feel good."

In the spirit of Fernando, we go, we do, we build, and we accumulate. We impress, we influence, we persuade, and we push. We fill our quotas, pay our dues, put in our time, and tell ourselves things will get better someday. We've got our numbers to meet, our projections to satisfy, our productivity to maintain, and our charts that must stay up and to the right.

All the while the emptiness is still there. If we can just keep going, if we can keep on performing, maybe no one will notice there's nothing to support that smooth and good looking exterior. And then the cracks appear.

We blow it off by saying we're in a rut, but remember; sometimes the only difference between a rut and a grave is six feet.

Friends, beware the barrenness of a busy life. Listen to this, from our New Testament lesson:

[Jesus]...was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots.
(Mark 4:34, TMSG)

Friends, this was nothing fancy. There were no well-crafted professional techniques. Instead, it was time. Time spent together. Time spent listening. Time spent with people being real with each other. Time spent hanging out with Jesus.

Friends, I believe this so passionately. What we're about is not one more activity to set up alongside the others. In order for there to be a difference in your life, you cannot come here one hour a week and then live like the rest of the world the rest of the time. It doesn't work that way. There's going to church, and then there's living the Christ filled life;

the two are quite different, and it concerns me when I think that too many of us don't understand that.

It's not living a life of good intentions, paying our bills, keeping up appearances, and staying out of trouble. Instead, it's life and death. It's daily becoming more like Christ.

If it's a matter of choosing between this and sports, or hobbies, or business, or anything else, please understand what hangs in the balance, and make the right choice.

Friends, everything, everything, everything, everything comes in second place to Jesus. Don't fool yourselves by thinking otherwise.

In order to survive, we must have a place in our inner worlds where God can not just speak but also live.

There's a story told of "an old Scot who'd been a member of a church just outside Edinburgh for many years. One night during an especially heated session meeting, another elder said something that was recklessly unkind. The old Scot was deeply wounded- he rose from his seat, walked out the door, and didn't return.

"A month passed, then a year. Letters were sent, but the old Scot was hurt, angry, and bitter. Though he'd marched away from the church, he told people he'd been forced out.

"Time passed and a new pastor was called. He went to see the man, and when the door opened the pastor could see the anger and bitterness on his red face. As they went into the living room, not a word was spoken. They sat by the fire, looked at the burning coals, and said nothing for nearly an hour.

"Then the pastor stood up, took a pair of tongs, removed a burning coal from the fire, and set it on the hearth. They watched it flicker, grow dim, and finally burn out and get cold. The pastor picked it up again, placed it back in the fire, and they watched it begin to burn bright and strong again. The pastor looked at the old man and said, 'We miss you at the kirk.'"¹

¹ Robert Kopp, contributor, "To Illustrate." Preaching, May-June, 1993, p. 62.

Friends, too many of us are burning out and don't know what to do about it. This is why these things are so important (you may remember them from last week):

- You must be here regularly.
- You must have a rich inner life.
- You need to know how to pray.
- You have to have a small group of people with whom you can be real, and who will love you enough to hold you accountable for the quality and caliber of your life.
- And you need a way to express all that so others will get it too.

That's experiencing God. Nothing else will satisfy that emptiness.

If there's a longing inside you, pay attention to it. Listen to it. Hear what it's telling you. It could save your life.