

**"A Tempting and Lonely Place"**  
**Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time**  
**Fr. Mike Galbraith**

There is nothing more tempting than a lonely place. A lonely place where phones do not ring and loud voices all shouting at once do not compete for our attention. A lonely place where we can hear ourselves think, feel our own calmed breathing, rediscover the inner rhythms which seek in vain to regulate our lives. A lonely place where we can listen to the wind rippling through the trees or, perhaps, to the full and wise sound of stillness. A lonely place free from the distraction of television and the condemnation of calendars. A place of tranquil rest and blessed retreat. There is nothing more tempting than a lonely place.

"And in the morning," Mark tells us, "a great while before day, Jesus rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35). There is nothing more tempting than a lonely place, and most of us search eagerly for such a location. For some of us, the lonely place is actually a place, a spot high in the mountains where the air is hushed and the world below seems serene, a rock on the edge of the ocean where we can lose our thoughts among the restless waves and the vast gray depths, or even a private spot near our home where we can walk to be alone beneath the starry night sky.

For others of us, we must be content with a lonely place which is really a time. A little solitude in the car between sales appointments, a last cup of morning coffee with only the accompaniment of a quietly humming refrigerator, or a few minutes watching the fire die in the fireplace, the house silent after all others have gone to bed.

There is nothing more tempting than a lonely place. We all seek such places, guard them, and cherish them. "And in the morning a great while before day, Jesus rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed."

Occasionally, in my seminary homiletic/preaching classes, we were asked to preach a sermon from any text of our choice from the first chapter of Mark. There are many rich passages to be found there: the preaching of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the first call of the disciples, the healing of a leper. All of these stories, and more, are there in Mark's opening chapter, and yet most of us seminarians did not select any of these passages. Pressed by exams and papers, meetings and various seminary functions and feeling the pull of too much work and too many demands, most of us were irresistibly drawn to the seductive tranquility of this story about Jesus rising early in the morning to go to a lonely place. The sermons they created were as predictable as they were passionate: Jesus had spent the previous day, they say, in a fever pitch of ministry, preaching in the synagogue, healing the sick and demon-possessed, and now, in a moment of needed retreat, he rises early in the morning to go to a lonely place to pray. Just so, they go on to claim, we, too, need times of quiet reflection and serene prayer lest the busy world drowns out the voice of God. As an old Christian hymn goes, "There is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God." These reflections, like most reflections, say at least as much about the preachers as they do about the hearers - ministers desperately in need of a lonely place. There is nothing more tempting than a lonely place.

But these reflections miss something important about the character of the lonely place....

*Fr. Mike*