

Mark 3

Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Crowds Follow Jesus

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was.

I was blessed with the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land this past spring with forty people from the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Shadyside Presbyterian Church. Ever since our trip when I read the Bible, visions of people and places swirl in my head.

Each place we visited in the Holy Land was special for its own purpose. Imagining the feelings of Mary where the angel appeared to her in Nazareth, seeing Bethlehem, approaching at the traditional place of Jesus' birth, standing in the ruins of the synagogue where Jesus worshipped in Capernaum, reading the Beatitudes on the Mountain where Jesus spoke those words, riding a "Jesus Boat" on the Sea of Galilee, praying at the Garden of Gethsemane, and walking the way of the cross. Yes, each experience had an amazing impact on my life and faith.

After days of hearing about the turmoil in the Holy Land and traveling in the cities where the holiness of the land was exploited for the benefit of the commerce

spending time by the Sea of Galilee was very wonderful. While walking back to the bus from Capernaum Dr. Barnes asked me of all the sites we had visited on the trip, which was my favorite. Without hesitation I quickly declared that this had been my favorite day. The sites around the Sea of Galilee were peaceful and relaxing. Dr. Barnes simply replied, "Do you see why Jesus and the disciples often withdrew to this place?" With an obvious response of yes, these words have stuck with me through many life experiences in the past nine months.

As I experience this Advent season I am delighted to share with you that, my joy, hope, faith, and love of God has grown leaps and bounds since this time only one year ago. In my daily life, the words of Dr. Barnes have touched my heart as I experience the busyness of life as a seminary student, who longs to do as much ministry in my church as possible. When I face opposition in my ministry, when I recognize that I am spreading my efforts in too many directions, when I face personal demons in my life I'm reminded of the need to withdraw into the presence of God; whether His presence be a walk amongst His beautiful nature like that walk by the Sea of Galilee or just simply relaxing on my couch and reading my Bible in prayer listening for God.

During this time of busy Christmas to-do lists, let us remember to withdraw into God's presence and remember that this time of Advent teaches us patience for the coming of our Savior who loves us and adores us. Expecting the Savior's entrance into our lives may not bring joy and happiness all the time. When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior many unexpected things may happen; embrace these moments of light and dark that form our unconditional relationship with the Triune God.

Dear Lord,

Your gift of Jesus to us is not deserved. We are not worthy of Your love, grace, and mercy, but you are amazing and grant it to us anyway. Please allow our hearts and lives to be used according to Your will. Help us to remember that when the world feels like it's closing in, we can withdraw to your loving, fatherly arms of comfort, peace, and love. In the Name of our Holy Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!