

**The Reverend Mark S. Merrill
September 3, 2006**

COME AWAY PLACES

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15 &
Song of Solomon 2:8-13

The Song of Solomon is a book of love poems, relating the exchange between a man and a woman who long to be together. In vs. 10 of chapter 2, the beloved, the man in this exchange, says to the woman, “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.” In commenting on this passage, Ruth McDonald writes:

God calls us to ‘come away’ to commune with God and with nature. The invitation of the man to the woman to ‘come away’ makes me think about how God loves to be with us; how God longs to be with us and enjoy us and to let us enjoy God’s presence.

Ms. McDonald continues:

When I was young I felt God invite me to ‘come away’ and just be. I even had a special place that I went to be alone with me and with God, where I went to separate myself from everything else. My place ‘away’ was a branch on a red maple tree on my front lawn. No one could see me up there, and I would sit and listen to the leaves rustle and examine the bumpy bark and smell the moist earth below, and just be. When Jesus lived on earth he often went ‘away’ to enjoy God, to wonder about life, and to connect with God on his own. Having an ‘away’ place where you go just to be is something God values. Time away. God values you and me taking time ‘away’ to wonder about life and to enjoy God.

Two of the references of Jesus ‘going away’ to enjoy God are in the gospel of Mark. “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (1:35). And, “Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray” (6:45-46).

This is Labor Day Weekend – a yearly national tribute to the contributions American workers have made to the strength, freedom, leadership, prosperity, and well-being of our country.

We’ve been marking the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina – remembering the loss of life, devastation, and disruption to lives it brought and the rebuilding of lives, homes, businesses and communities that is ongoing and seems overwhelming.

Wars continue in the Middle East on several fronts; and there are so many places of oppression, abuse, violence, terrorism, even slavery, such as the Rev. Heidi McGinness told us about a couple of weeks ago in the Sudan.

Economic hardships affect the lives of many more, while others yet live luxurious lifestyles and so much is spent on that which divides and separates instead of on that which builds up and forms community and on that which is done for the least of these.

You meet yourselves coming and going on too many days with calendars crammed way too full, and the demands of work or school are exhausting; or finding that, for whatever reasons, you are slowing down and you are accomplishing fewer and fewer things. You deal with medical issues, injuries, treatments, surgeries, chronic conditions, someone close to you dying, the death of a loved one.

With all that was just said about our daily living, many of you might be thinking that just getting to church is all that I can do to ‘come away’ to be with God. Who has the time to climb up on a tree limb, just to be, and to be with God? And so you are here this morning, seeking out fellowship within the community of believers, coming to be in God’s presence, offering your worship and praise, to be challenged and renewed for the days ahead. This is your ‘come away place’ for the week.

In the *These Days Daily Devotions for Living by Faith*, the Rev. Michael Clark wrote the following:

I never hear my alarm clock....Each day begins with some coffee and a sit-down with God. The morning time is quiet and peaceful for me, a time to pray. Simple prayers are said not only for me but for family and friends too. Isn’t there enough out there in life to warrant a little more time with God to start each day? The daily journey can take us lots of places, and when we start each day with God, we most assuredly have the best guide.

Rev. Clark continues as he reflects on Psalm 45:8 – Stringed instruments make you glad.

I want to draw your attention to another way of thinking about God’s Word, as it is heard through music. The psalmist writes here that it is music that makes the hearer glad, and it raised the question for me, What makes me glad? I would be lying if I were to write that on this spiritual journey every day will be great and we’ll never get tired. The truth is this: we’ll get tired, and every day will not be the ‘spiritual high’ that we would want. It’s times like these when I find myself listening to music that helps restore my soul. Listening to God’s creation of music, God’s Word expressed in song, can uplift even my most tiresome days along this journey of faith.

“Listening to music that helps restore my soul” – as I read these words of the Rev. Clark, several things came to mind. When I was in elementary school and after I had started taking piano lessons, my father noticed that if things had not been going well for me, for whatever reason, he would often find me at the piano playing some song. At an early age music had become a way for dealing with stressful situations, and was a way to help ‘restore my soul.’ And since then music has been a help to restore my soul – whether it is taking the time to listen to one of Dale’s voluntaries at the end of a service or being fortunate enough at times during the week to walk out of the office and hear him practicing; or listening to the 5th movement of Gustav Mahler’s Symphony #2, the Resurrection Symphony – especially on Easter; or listening to one of the other gifted musicians of this congregation sharing in an ensemble or as a soloist; or hearing some other recording or concert on a CD or on the radio; or being at a concert and having a piece of music touch me.

Now I am not like the Rev. Clark when it comes to getting up in the morning, and starting the day off with a cup of coffee and a sit-down with God. I am aware that for many people, getting up early and being outside to enjoy that cup of coffee and the sunrise, being in the garden, taking a walk in the park, going on that bike ride or spending time in prayer and/or Bible study are “come away places” – times for being in God’s presence. Or it may be working in the garden or on a craft and the

enjoyment of this makes this time for you being in God's presence. I have noticed that 'restoring my soul' moments happen as I am baking bread – when the yeast proofs, and then the dough rises, and finally as the smell of the baking bread fills the house – in all of these there have been those 'come away' moments that move me beyond myself to an encounter with the created order, God's design.

For some, that 'come away place' may be a yearly journey, whether it be in the mountains or at the seashore or at the family cabin on a lake. The change in scenery and being able to enjoy the beauty and wonder of God's created order become ways that help to 'restore your soul'.

One of the places this can be for me is out on the back deck of my sister's home in Green Bay as the sun is setting – so many of the sunsets are awe inspiring. This must be true for my brother-in-law as well, as he has taken hundreds of photographs over the years of the sunsets from his deck.

And coming to mind was the last scene in the movie, *Grand Canyon*. One of the main characters, Simon, had been to the Grand Canyon before and said that being there and seeing it helped him put things in perspective, though in the movies he uses much more colorful language. As a way of saying 'thank you' to another main character, Mack, who has never been to the Grand Canyon, Simon takes Mack's family and his own to the Canyon. The last scene is of everyone getting out of Simon's van and looking out at the grandeur of the vast expanse of the Canyon.

Though the film does not use religious language in the brief dialogue of the scene, the expressions on the characters faces as they look out, are for me, realizations of their being in a 'come away' place, of being in God's presence.

Jesus never went away on permanent 'away time with God.' He always came back and taught and healed and/or engaged the Pharisees and scribes in debate, often very confrontational in nature as we learned from the passage from the Gospel of Mark this morning. And remember before the confrontation in chapter 7 of the Gospel of Mark are the 2 verses read earlier that talk about Jesus going up on the mountain to pray.

Because of fatigue, burn-out, that sense of 'I am only 1 person, what can I possibly do that will make a difference,' of being overwhelmed by what needs to be done, and more, we need those 'come away places' that restore our souls, that feed us for our daily living and for the tasks at hand. We can't remain in a permanent 'come away' place. We too are to come back, to be involved in witness, and ministry and service, within the scope of our gifts and talents and capabilities, to be there to support and care for one another, for family and friends throughout all of life.