5th Sunday Ordinary Time, B

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Everyone loves it when Jesus shows up. His presence makes a difference. Things happen. Mother-in-laws are healed. The sick are cured. Demons are cast out. Lives are changed. This is true not only for the people in Jesus' time but also for us here and now. He comes to our house as surely as he went to the house of Simon and Andrew. Let me tell you about some houses that I have visited.

I know a man with an addiction to alcohol who said that one day he prayed, and Jesus removed from him the urge to drink. He has been sobered ever since. I remember a man who had a vision of Jesus reaching out and taking him by the hand. I have heard men and women tell the story of how Jesus called them into the priesthood or religious life. I know of medical diagnoses that have changed for no apparent medical reason.

It happens. Those experiences are real. Jesus is present and active in our lives and the world. Those are the kind of things, for which the whole town was gathered at Jesus' door. Faith comes a bit easier in those moments. Jesus is real. His presence is felt. Results are seen. All is well.

What happens, though, when we awaken to find ourselves in the nighttime of life? You know as well as I that there are times when life is just plain hard. We don't get our way. Things happen that we never wanted to have happened. Faith is difficult and its results are not so obvious. In those times it seems as if there is only darkness and Jesus is

nowhere to be seen. Some will assume he has forsaken them. They will abandon their faith. They will give up on the Church and Jesus himself. So, what do we do when Jesus sneaks off and we feel all alone? That is the nighttime question.

According to today's gospel that time will come. Jesus will get up in the early morning hours, while it is still very dark, and go to a deserted place. This is not, however, about Jesus escaping or getting away. It is about prayer; his and ours. It is no longer about what is happening around us or to us but what is happening within us.

Regardless of how dark it may seem Jesus never leaves us. He may withdraw but that does not mean he is absent. His withdrawing is an invitation for us to move to a new place, to a deserted place. He calls us out of the comfort of the house into the vulnerability of the wilderness. It is a deserted and desolate place; a place where there is only prayer. There, we are alone with the Lord.

We all have deserted places in our lives. For some, it is accepting the limitations that age and disease bring. Others deal with broken relationships. Loneliness and grief are desert places for some. The struggle to make ends meet in a failing economy is a wilderness many are trying to escape. You could each name your wildernesses and deserts.

Most of us don't like deserted places. We tend to avoid them. They are empty places that can be scary and dangerous. There is nowhere to hide. We must face up to who we are and who we are not. We are confronted

by things done and left undone. Our sorrows and losses are laid bare in the deserted place. We begin to recognize that our successes, possessions, and accomplishments don't ultimately count for much. In the wilderness, we must admit we are not in control. Time in the deserted place is a matter of life and death. It is also, however, the place where our deepest healing can happen.

There is a price, though, for going to the wilderness. We must trade the security of the house for the risk of the desert. The wilderness prayer of self-surrender must begin to replace the house prayer that only asks for things to happen or change. Wilderness prayer doesn't ask so much that circumstances will be changed but that we will be changed. The wilderness makes that change possible.

Jesus goes to the deserted places of our lives to draw us there. If he didn't go first, if he didn't invite us to that place, I guess that none of us would ever go there. Yet, the wilderness and desert places of our lives are sacred places. In the desert there is only God, there is nothing but God. Jesus is drawing us deeper and deeper into the heart of God. Ironically, that happens in the place we thought was barren, empty, and desolate.

The deserted places of our lives are the places of Jesus' prayer. They are the starting point for his message of good news. Good news comes from the empty and desolate places. Jesus will leave this deserted place to go proclaim his message in the neighboring towns. Before today's gospel, Jesus emerged from the wilderness saying, **"This is the time of**

fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." Before him was **"A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"** Before that, the voice of God spoke creation into existence when **"the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss."** New life evolves from deserted and empty places. The good news of Christ comes from the wilderness.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"Everyone is looking for you," they told Jesus. Yet Simon and his companions were the only ones to find him. Maybe they were the only ones willing to go to the deserted place. I wonder where the others were searching. The safety of town? The familiarity of neighboring houses? Standing in line at the door? I wonder where we will search when the nighttime of our life comes. Go to the deserted places of your life, places that you think are barren, empty, desolate, and there you will find Jesus, praying. **Amen**.