



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

February 21, 2016

"Follow Me" (Encounters With Jesus Series) - Luke 8:22-25

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Thirty-three people from First Prez were in Svay Pak, Cambodia in January and another six were in the Philippines. I'm going to tell you more about what we saw and experienced in Cambodia in a moment. But what I will say right now is that Jesus shows up in the most broken places in our world. And He has the power to rescue, to heal and to transform people whose lives are shattered. He can restore communities that seem, to many of us, to be beyond helping.

In Luke chapter 8, Jesus and His disciples meet a person everyone had given up on—everyone that is, except Jesus. After this man has an encounter with Jesus Christ he will go home to his friends and family and tell everyone what God had done for him. The change in his life will be so dramatic that everyone he meets will eventually want to know what happened to him. The reason that man's life was transformed was because Jesus and His disciples moved towards a messy, complicated, fearful place instead of running away from it.

Let's look at Luke chapter 8, verse 22. - *"One day, (Jesus) got into a boat with his disciples and he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side of the lake.' So they set out..."*

As Jesus gathered His disciples on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee He pointed across the lake to the eastern side of the sea and said, "Let's go over to the other side." No one would have been surprised if His disciples had looked at each other and said, "What? Is He out of his mind? What are we going to do over there?"

On the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, in the region called the Decapolis, was an area with ten fairly sophisticated cities built by the Greeks and populated with people who practiced a fertility cult. The pig was their sacred animal. They sacrificed pigs as a part of their worship of the fertility god, Pan. For the Pharisees, the region of the Decapolis was a very bad place because of its history as a region where the Old Testament pagan god, Baal, had been worshipped and because of the immoral practices of the fertility cult of their own day. This would be like going to Svay Pak.

Jesus says, "Let's go over there." Let's go to a place that from the perspective of His disciples was probably considered hopeless. His disciples probably thought He had lost his mind. Why go to a place like that? What's the point? What good could they do there? That reaction is similar to the reaction we

sometimes have to places in our own lives and in the lives of people all around us. There are just some situations that seem hopeless to us. There are people we think are just too far-gone. We may even think there is no hope for our lives either. What Jesus does in Luke chapter 8 should explode that way of looking at the world, at other people, and at ourselves.

The disciples had signed up to follow Jesus wherever He led them. And this night, they were going to go sailing on a lake that was notorious for sudden, violent storms. And they were going to a place where they were pretty sure they would not be welcome.

The church is by nature a seafaring organization. We are not like a person who just lives on their boat but never takes it out of the marina. Jesus' church is not a sunset cruise that serves heavy pupus and cocktails as we sail in the trade winds along the Waikiki beachfront. As fun as that is, we are a community that actually puts to sea. We venture out from the safety of the harbor. Some of Jesus' disciples were fisherman so they had a lot of experience on the Sea of Galilee, but even those seasoned fisherman were not prepared for what happened that night.

What they discover is the same thing we discover sometimes. Following Jesus can be incredibly unnerving.

Verse 23 – *“and as they sailed (Jesus) fell asleep.”* I love that! Jesus was snoozing in the back of the boat! He was exhausted. He was worn out. I love the fact that our God knows from personal experience what it's like to be tired. Sailing CAN be very relaxing. Certain points of sail can easily put you to sleep. It's easy for me to understand how Jesus, tired from all the work he had done, and because he knew who he was and whose he was, he fell asleep in the back of the boat.

Verse 23 - *“And a windstorm came down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water and they were in danger. 24 And (the disciples) went and woke him, saying, ‘Master, Master, we are perishing!’ And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm.”*

The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by mountains, including Mount Hermon which is 10,000 feet high. The cold air can rush down the mountainside and create a furious windstorm on the Sea of Galilee. That is probably what happened that night. The wind was so strong that waves were crashing into the boat and they were about to sink.

The disciples make a number of really good decisions in this story. The first really good decision was to go sailing with Jesus in the first place. That is always a really smart move even if what happens when you go sailing with Jesus scares you to death, or shakes up your world, or breaks your heart, or puts you in a

situation where you feel in over your head.

The next great decision they make is to turn to Jesus when things get crazy. They had no idea really what Jesus could do but their instinct was to wake Him up and point out the fact that they were taking on water.

Where is Jesus? He is sleeping. The boat is being swamped and Jesus is asleep on a cushion, fully at peace, in the stern of the ship. His disciples wake Him up, and accuse Him of not caring about them. *“Why did you get us into this mess?”* When Mark tells this story in his gospel he tells us that the disciples say, *“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”* (Mark 4:38).

In that dangerous situation, the followers of Jesus are going to discover something they didn't know about Jesus. He is Lord of the wind and the waves. What Jesus did was unprecedented. He took charge of the weather and calmed the wind and the sea. If you ever want to see for yourself that Jesus is indeed Lord over storms, you have to go sailing with Jesus.

Verse 25 - *(Jesus) said to them, “Where is your faith?”* That is a very blunt question. It can mean, *“Why don't you have any faith?”* But it can also mean, in what are you placing your trust? Apparently, the disciples' confidence was in the power of the storm and not in the love and power of Jesus. I get that. Sometimes the circumstances of our lives are so threatening that those circumstances are the only things we can see. Even if we are followers of the One who can calm a storm, sometimes Jesus fades into *the shadows and we lose sight of*

what He can do. We can have more confidence in the power of the storms of our lives than we sometimes do in Jesus.

So Jesus rubs the sleep from His eyes, stands up and calms the storm. He then says to His disciples, *“Your faith is in the power of the storm isn't it? Put your faith in me.”*

“And (the disciples) were afraid, and they marveled, saying to one another, ‘Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?’”

The authority of Jesus stuns His disciples. Even the wind and the sea obey Him. The reaction of the disciples is totally understandable. They're afraid. They've just seen something they've never seen anyone do. Only GOD could calm a storm. So who is this? Notice that Jesus does not pray; He simply commands the winds and the waves to stop. He does not ask God to calm the storm. He speaks to the storm and the winds stop blowing and the sea becomes calm. Only One person can do that.

His disciples are filled with wonder and they are filled with new questions. That's what happens when you go sailing with Jesus. We might be afraid for a while when we set sail with Jesus. When we move in the direction of the messes in our communities and world, we can be a little uncertain—a little nervous. But we will also be in awe when we see what Jesus can do in the face of the challenges we face when we sail with Jesus in the direction of the messes of the world or the messes in our own lives. And when you see what Jesus can do, you will have a whole new set of questions.

What the disciples discover on this expedition to the other side of the lake is that when we follow Jesus, when we do what He tells us to do, our faith and confidence in Him will grow. We might be a little anxious along the way but in the end, when we discover that Jesus is alive and at work in the messiest places in our lives and our world, our faith in Him will grow.

Verse 26 - *"Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27 As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs."*

As soon as they arrive on the other side of the lake a man, who is completely out of his mind, confronts them. Just as their breathing and their heart rates had started to return to normal, a man with an evil spirit, bloody, unrestrained and apparently frighteningly strong, comes out of the graveyard. How crazy is that? The disciples, who had just survived a terrifying storm at sea, had to be freaked out of their minds by the sight of this man who approached them as they stepped ashore. They had encountered demon possession before but this man looked especially dangerous.

Mark's version of this story stresses the pitiful, hopeless condition of this man (see Mark 5:1-5, NRSV). He had cut himself with stones. He lived in the tombs, shrieking night and day. This man's family and friends had tried everything to keep him from hurting himself and others but no one knew what to do with him. He now roamed the outskirts of his community, a threat to himself and others, living among the tombs.

Jesus took His disciples to a place they probably thought hopeless and to a man living the most miserable life imaginable. Jesus does that for a couple of very good reasons. First and foremost, Jesus had compassion on the people of the Decapolis. And He had compassion for this man and wanted to see him delivered from what tormented him.

But Jesus had another reason for taking His disciples to the other side of the lake. He wanted them to know that if God can work in a place as seemingly hopeless as this, there is no situation beyond the reach of God's mercy and love.

As the man from the tombs approaches, Jesus does not turn away. He does not turn His back. This man is a human being of infinite value to God, one like us who is made in the image of his creator. What happens next happens quickly and will leave everyone who sees it in shock.

Jesus commands the demons to leave the man and enter a herd of pigs feeding nearby. That herd of 2,000 pigs run down the hillside into the Sea of Galilee. Two thousand pigs, probably used in their fertility cult, had gone for a swim in the lake. So the people wanted Jesus out of their town.

Jesus deliberately goes to where He finds evil ruling and He brings his disciples with Him. He goes to confront the forces opposed to the kingdom of God. He leads His disciples to a place of tremendous need and to a person who was enslaved to something that was destroying his life. Everyone had given up on this man. Everyone, that is, but God.

God has not given up on us. God has not given up on the people in the world around us. God now calls us to go to those places and to those people in our lives that many people, including many Christians, have given up on. We are called to go with Jesus and tell them that God can break into their lives and begin to change everything.

Jesus is not about putting distance between Himself and the real problems of the world. He's not about keeping us insulated from the realities of a broken world. He's about sailing towards those problems. And what I'm discovering, more and more is this. Only the grace of Jesus Christ and His love changes any of us. It is the good news of the love and grace of Jesus that we get to share with others.

In Sway Pak, Cambodia, we spent some time in January with the pastor of the church that is a part of the ministry of Agape International Mission. Pastor Chantha grew up during the reign of terror inflicted on Cambodia by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. I asked Pastor Chantha to tell us a little bit of his story. He told us that at the age of five he saw his father executed by the Khmer Rouge—right in front of his eyes.

He and his one-year old brother were then separated from their mom. They were placed in one camp and she was placed in another. Chantha, as a five-year old, was suddenly responsible for taking care of his little brother as well as fending for himself. He told us that his brother cried all the time because there was never enough food to eat.

Pastor Chantha said he grew up to be a very angry young man. I can understand why.

He eventually met a couple of Christian guys from the United States who were living in Phnom Penh. They gave him a job and a place to live. He eventually became a follower of Jesus and then a pastor who apparently had a very effective ministry. But he burnt out as a pastor so he left his church and went back to doing the only other thing he knew how to do. He became a driver for Don and Bridget Brewster, the founders of Agape International Mission (the organization two of our teams partnered with in January).

Don knew that Chantha had been a pastor and Don and Bridget also knew that Sway Pak needed a church and they wanted Chantha to be the pastor of that new congregation. Chantha was not interested in being a pastor, especially in a place like Sway Pak. But eventually, he and his wife said yes to serving in that terrible place with a notorious reputation for the trafficking of children.

One night, a gang battle erupted in front of their house between two really bad groups of men who were battling for control of the brothels in Sway Pak. One of the gang leaders was bludgeoned over the head and he lay bleeding to death in the street in front of the pastor's house. As Pastor Chantha looked out the window he knew he had to do something. So, he rushed into the street to try and save the life of this really bad guy. As he began to pick him up a woman across the street came out of her house and started yelling at him. "What are you doing pastor? He is an evil man. Let him die."

Pastor Chantha said, "I'm not going to let him die. He needs Jesus." So he took this very bad man to the hospital where the doctors reluctantly treated him. Two weeks later that man was released from the hospital and Pastor Chantha was presented with a \$2,000 hospital bill. The pastor told the doctor, "I don't have \$2,000." The doctor asked him, "How much money do you have?" Chantha said, "I have \$120 and I have a two-week old son at home and I need to feed him." Pastor Chantha said he and the doctor stared at each other for 30 minutes without saying a word. The doctor eventually accepted \$100 from Pastor Chantha.

The pastor took the gang leader back to his house in Sway Pak. When they got to his home the man fell on his face before the pastor, weeping and thanking him for saving his life. The pastor told the man, "I didn't save your life. Jesus did." That former gang leader is now a follower of Jesus. He's married with two children. He lives and works in Phnom Penh and is actively involved in telling others about what Jesus can do in a person's life.

Only the grace and love of God can do something like that—change someone. Only the grace and love of God can change any of us. That's the good news of the Gospel that Jesus wants us to share with the world.

God calls us to be His witnesses to people who desperately need to hear that there is hope for their lives. There are people all around us who are living without hope. Will we go sailing with Jesus?

After Jesus freed that man who met him on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, people rushed to see what had happened. And here's what they saw. They saw their pork business floating in the lake. And that is all they really seemed to care about. What they totally missed was this: Jesus and the formerly demon-possessed man, who's life had been out of control, is sitting with Jesus, at peace, clothed and in his right mind.

Will we go with Jesus to the other side of the lake, to people that he loves? You don't have to go to Sway Pak to see Jesus do his miraculous work of transformation. You can see Him do that right here in Hawaii. If you're a young family in our church, you can see Jesus begin to do His work of transformation when you decide to spend time with other families who do not know Jesus and are already in your lives. You can see Jesus do amazing things as you sit down and talk story with a co-worker. It's my prayer that when you see a need in your community that you and your small group or group of friends will go sailing with Jesus and discover what He wants to do, and how he wants to use you, to bring hope and healing to situations that seem hopeless.

Jesus says to us, "*Follow Me.*" And when we do, we will find ourselves moving towards the places and the people many have given up on.

When we go sailing with Jesus, sometimes He's going to take us to the messiest places in our lives, in our communities, and in our world because that's where Jesus is and that's where Jesus wants us to be.