

“A Dangerous Adventure”

Matthew 8:18-34

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Sometimes when we read Scripture the meaning and the importance of the passage is just plainly clear to us. But then there are those sections that don't seem to make any sense. I don't know about you but today's reading can seem like that. When we read this passage it doesn't seem to fit with what we know of Jesus and the way he interacted with people. For example, we're told several times in the gospels that when Jesus saw the large crowds that came to be healed and to hear him speak that he had compassion on them. But then in today's reading when Jesus sees a crowd gathering he wants to leave. And then there's the things he said which sound more like a secret code than clear teaching. He says, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," and, "let the dead bury their own dead." What odd responses to the men who came to him that day. I think we'll see this morning that along with Jesus calming the storm and casting out the demons, all of these stories are about the same thing – they're about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

It seems to me that there's something in human nature that loves adventure. When we're young we make up our own adventures, even if it means travelling no farther than the end of the street. But if we look back across history we find that there have been people who have set off on real-life adventures. We think of names like Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, and James Cook who sailed off into the unknown. When they returned home with their tales of adventure then others would be inspired to do the same. By the time Lewis and Clark returned to St. Louis in 1806 there were numerous others ready to head west in search of wealth but also adventure.

These days there don't seem to be as many opportunities for real adventure. But if that's what you're interested in, there is now a Dutch company called Mars One that plans to create a permanent colony on Mars by the year 2023. That's only ten years from now. They just recently began accepting applications and in three weeks time more than 78,000 people have applied to become the first permanent residents of Mars. I can't help but wonder if those 78,000 people have really thought about what they would be getting into. Mars has no atmosphere, no water, no oxygen, no ability to produce the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. Everything has to be delivered from 50 million miles away! One of the most significant things about moving to Mars is that it's a one-way trip. There are no plans to provide transportation back home. Before moving to Mars you should probably consider carefully what is really required.

We find the same situation in this passage. Jesus was surrounded by a large crowd of people. But they were more interested in the healing than the teaching. So Jesus decides to head over to the other side of the lake. But before he can get to the boat one of the Jewish scribes comes to him and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." In other words, he's saying, "following you looks like it might be interesting. This could be an interesting adventure." And then Jesus answers, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Basically Jesus is telling this scribe, "Following me, being my disciple, is difficult. This life of discipleship is not the comfortable, luxury life of a scribe. We never know if we will have a place to stay or not. It's an adventure all right, but it's a dangerous adventure."

If the scribe was too eager to follow Jesus without considering what is involved, the next man was not eager enough. Another disciple came to him and said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." This disciple is not one of the inner twelve but he was one of the ones who had been following Jesus. This seems like a reasonable request so it sounds strange to us that Jesus would tell the man that he couldn't go to his father's funeral. Jesus says, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." The thing is, the man's father was likely still living. Jewish custom required that the burial take place the same day as the death. If the man's father had died that day it is unlikely that he would have had time to visit with Jesus. This man would like to follow Jesus later. Perhaps in a few weeks or months or even years.

Jesus answers that the time to respond to his call is now. Apart from Christ, every one of us is spiritually dead because of sin. But then Jesus comes along and offers us life again. He says, "follow me." And following Jesus is always done on his terms. Jesus is asking this man to give him greater honor than his own parents. We need to know that in that culture, the only one who deserved greater honor than parents was God. Jesus is claiming the honor that is due to God alone.

Apparently neither of these men were able to accept Jesus' requirements because neither one went with him. So Jesus and his twelve disciples got into the boat and headed across the lake. The Sea of Galilee is not particularly large – it's only eight miles wide and thirteen miles long – but it sits 680 feet below sea level, surrounded by high hills. As a result, strong winds can come down over the hills onto the lake without warning and so Jesus and his disciples are caught in one of these sudden storms. It was so bad that the waves were crashing over the side of the boat and they were in

danger of sinking. But Jesus was exhausted from a long day of teaching and healing and he was sound asleep. In the Old Testament, the ability to sleep soundly is a sign of faith in God's protective power. Psalm 3:5 says, "I lay down and slept; I awoke again, for the LORD sustained me." By sleeping, Jesus is demonstrating perfect faith.

His disciples, however, are scared. They wake Jesus up and say, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." Some commentators see this as a step of faith in Jesus' power. I'm not so sure. I think they may have been saying more like, "come help us bail the water out of the boat." Either way they have come to Jesus for help and he answers, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" They have recently seen Jesus' authority in his words and his authority over disease, but they still have little faith. But Jesus then gets up and rebukes the winds and the sea." The Gospel of Mark records Jesus saying to the wind, "Peace, be still!" In the same way that Jesus healed those who were sick, here also he exercises his authority simply by speaking. All he has to do is tell the wind to stop and it stopped immediately. The disciples respond by asking, "what sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

Ironically, they get the answer to that question from a most unlikely source. When they arrive at the shore they are greeted by two demon-possessed men coming out of the tombs. These men are in such bad shape that no one else could come by there. Sin always separates us from each other and from God. The effect of sin in our lives is that we do not have healthy, godly relationships with others. Instead that fellowship is damaged. And just like the demon-possessed men, our sin is always hostile to the presence of Christ.

We don't talk much about demons these days and many people would dismiss the idea of demons or the devil as just an ancient way of understanding mental

illness. But it may be that the reason we aren't familiar with the demonic is that we haven't been exposed to it. For most of the history of this country we have been a nation committed to the Lordship of Jesus. We were founded as a Christian nation and maintained that foundation for generations. As such I think we have enjoyed divine protection, a hedge such as described in Isaiah 5:5. You certainly don't have to work too hard to see that evil is real and present in our world.

The surprise is that it is the demons who are the first ones in the Gospel of Matthew to recognize Jesus' true identity. They cry out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God?" They also recognize his authority. They ask, "Have you come here to torment us before the time?" The Bible is clear that there will be a time of judgment and that all evil will be cast out. But that time has not come yet, so the demons beg Jesus to let them go into the herd of pigs grazing on the hillside. Jesus gives them permission and then the pigs run down the hill into the lake and are drowned.

I've always felt kind of bad for the pigs in this story. But the first-century Jew hearing this story would have been cheering that the unclean pigs were wiped out and took the evil spirits with them. The real story here is that the pigs running into the

lake was a visual confirmation that the evil spirits had left the men and were gone for good. When the people from the village come out to see Jesus, instead of asking him to stay with them and teach them, they ask him to leave. When we come face to face with Jesus we can either welcome him or we can ask him to leave.

In the Gospels, when people came in contact with Jesus the Bible says they "marveled." But today people aren't amazed much. With the increasing speed of technology, we have come to expect amazing things. But in Jesus' day people were amazed. In Mark and Luke's version of this story, one of the men who had been delivered from the demons ask to go with Jesus. But Jesus tells him no. He says, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." Jesus is still just as amazing today. He still has authority over disease and weather and even demons. If that's true, if Jesus really is God, then we owe him our total obedience and our total devotion. He is to be more important to us than our own families, our careers, and our desires. Look at what he requires of disciples. Count the costs. But don't delay. Today is the day to follow Jesus.

Amen