

This is a sermon Pastor Greg delivered at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation on Capitol Hill on July 5, 2009.

**Mark 6:1-13 (NRSV)**

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

---

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

What a wonderful pleasure to be back here with you again, to be back in this pulpit, in this wonderful sanctuary, which is both so very old and so very new. I have so many wonderful memories of

this place and of how graciously you welcomed Linda and me now nearly 6 years ago as your intern.

I was glad that our schedules linked up so that I could be here, and the readings could scarcely be more accommodating. The Gospel lesson provides a ready-made excuse for why my sermon might not be up to the standards of this pulpit. I do feel very much like I'm returning to my hometown and the Gospel reading tells us how dangerous that is. The analogy breaks down, of course, because you always believed in me *more* than I believed in myself.

Nonetheless, the familiarity of this Gospel reading tends to disguise what a very strange story it is. Jesus comes back to his home congregation, presumably in Nazareth although Mark doesn't say. His people, his family and friends have heard of his healings and his wisdom and have come to hear him teach. But then the conversation takes a strange turn and Jesus' hometown friends begin to ask themselves, "Isn't this Jesus the carpenter? Doesn't his family live right here among us? What's up with him? Who does he think he is?"

Jesus reacts and we're surprised at how defensive he is – "Prophets have honor," he says, "but not in their own homes, among their own kin." And then here comes what to me is the strangest part – "He could do no deed of power there." Oh, he laid hands on and healed a few sick people, but that was it.

Now, wait a minute. The Messiah, the son of the living God who created heaven and earth, who rules in majesty beyond the clouds, goes back home and meets a few scoffers and is completely undone. The One who will come to judge the living and the dead, who will bring this present darkness to its final and definitive end, can't cope with the bullies from his old neighborhood. Yikes. What is this story trying to tell us?

I think we learn, in this passage, something very important about the nature of God in Christ. Specifically, we learn that God is both irresistible and gracious. God will have God's way, God will reclaim what belongs to God, God will take back what he created originally. God is literally irresistible. But God also is gracious. God allows us the freedom to participate in this reclamation project. Or not. The project will go on, and it will conclude successfully. And God is gracious enough to let us decide whether we will be part of it.

There is ample evidence of God's graciousness in the Bible. The people clamor for a king in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel and God tells the people through Samuel that this king will take their sons and daughters and crops and vineyards, but when the people insist, God gives them the king they asked for. When the people complain, God frees them and feeds them and gives them land. God is so gracious that God even allows the people to reject him.

It follows that we need to be careful in our choice of the God we allow into our lives, because that is the God we will have. If we insist on a domesticated God, we will have a God who will not surprise us, will not challenge us, who will not open our minds or our hearts. If we insist on a God who will only comfort us, then we will have a comfortable God, a God without any sharp edges or hard choices. If we give God no power in our lives, we will have a powerless God, unable to reshape us for good.

But if we open our hearts and our lives to a God who loves us fiercely, hopes for us fervently, asks us to turn away from the world's certainties and to embrace the surprise and the beauty and the meaning and the purpose of the Kingdom of Heaven, then we will open ourselves to lives that are surprising and beautiful, meaningful and purposeful. This is not a God who will be comfortable though God comforts us at need; this is not a God who will be domesticated though God offers peace and assurance as we need it. This is not a God who will bully us or reform us willy nilly, but this is a God who

will transform us into the people we know we should be and at depth we want to be.

The first step is the most dangerous, the step that is literally a leap of faith. That step is to let God be God, and not just any God but *your* God, a God of power and freedom, a God who is unpredictable but reliable, mysterious but unmistakable, gracious but irresistible.

The people of Jesus' hometown couldn't make that step. Many of us can't make that step. That is the step of faith – faith is not an agreement with some doctrine or creed. Faith begins by allowing the mysterious, free, powerful, willful God of scripture into your life.

Am I saying that God is whoever and whatever we imagine? Not at all. God will reclaim and reform and reshape the world. Through our choices of what kind of God we will allow into our lives, we will participate in this reclamation project or we will not and that is how we will be judged. In fact, that is exactly what happens in the Gospel reading. Right after his rejection in his hometown, Jesus sends out his apostles, two-by-two into the neighboring villages. They are sent out with few resources, so that they will need to depend on the communities to which they are sent. They will not buy or bully people into believing, they will not force their way into people's homes, hearts or lives. But neither will they be diverted from the mission on which they are sent or the God whom they serve, a God who is gracious but irresistible.

This weekend we celebrate Independence Day and the Declaration of Independence and the question of what God we will allow into our national lives is very much at issue. At some times, we have chosen a jingoistic God, a God who supports us in our national adventures however misguided, and the result has been policies and conflicts that were senseless, stubborn and cruel. At other times, we have sought God's guidance and counsel and when we have listened to it, we have acted very much like the shining city

on a hill that we have imagined ourselves to be. What God will we allow into our national life today? That is still an open question.

At depth, this Gospel story shouldn't be such a surprise. Christ gave himself to us and then sends us out two by two, the way you all sent out Linda and me. When we left here, the congregation gave us farewell gifts. You gave us a chalice and a paten, a cup and a plate, but we would have to find bread and wine and people to share them with. And we have, 'way out in Calvert County. And they have become family to us.

You also gave me a framed scripture verse. It's a verse from Isaiah. The verse reads as follows: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'" Isaiah has this vision of the throne room of heaven, a vision of an amazingly large and impossibly powerful God, surrounded by smoke and flame and flying creatures with six wings. That verse is on the wall of my study, and every time I think I've got this ministry thing under control, I'm reminded of Isaiah, who had no idea of what he was asking for or agreeing to, but who had the faith to say, "Here am I; send me."

The plate, the cup and the book, these are the essential tools of ministry with which we were and we are sent out. These and an unshakeable faith in and commitment to a loving and surprising God, powerful and unpredictable, gracious and irresistible, utterly focused on the transformation of this world and the people in it. May God be praised! And warmest greetings to you from your brothers and sisters at Saint Nicholas.

Amen.