

“Go Away”
Luke 5:1-11
4th Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville
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The title of this morning’s sermon is “Go Away.”
Don’t worry, that’s not my message to YOU today...don’t take that wrong, I’m not telling any of you to go away.

I was just trying to remember the last time I told someone that.
Do you recall the last time you told someone to go away?

For me, I don’t think it was a person.
I think it was a dog.

Out walking our dog, there are a couple OTHER dogs on our block that are not exactly the friendliest...and sometimes they come chasing after our dog when I’m walking her.

They may be all bark and no bite, but I don’t really want to find out. So...on any number of occasions, I’ve had to get in between our dog and the other dog, sticking out my leg like I’m going to kick the other dog...I yell pretty loudly at the other dogs when they do this.

Very annoying...I don’t like saying: Go away!

When was the last time you said, “Go away,”???

To a person?

To a problem?

How about in church?

Can you imagine hearing those words in church?

Have you ever seen those church signs, the ones that say, “All are Welcome!”?

Every church with a sign seems to do this.
They put the words—all are welcome on their sign.

It’s the right thing to do. But secretly, I’d LOVE to drive by a church sign one day that said, “Go away!” It would be ingenious marketing—I would definitely go INTO a church that put “Go away!” on its sign...

Go away—those are two words that do not seem to belong in church. And yet churches sometimes say them—quietly, inadvertently perhaps—when new visitors aren’t welcomed in church, when new members can’t find a way to get plugged into their church—any church can, without even knowing it, say to someone:

Go away.

Why do I bring all this up?
Because we heard those words in our text.
Did you catch it?

According to our text from Luke, GO AWAY is what Simon Peter says to Jesus right before Jesus calls him.

“...they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break...But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’”

It sounds strange—go away—especially when it’s directed at Jesus. But according to scripture, Peter’s not the first person to say it. Did you hear our first Gospel passage for this morning? When Jesus is back preaching in his home synagogue?

They're so mad at what he has to say, they don't just tell Jesus to go away. A mob forms that tries to kill Jesus!

Or how about when Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac?
Do you remember how the people of the Gerasenes responded?
They didn't shout for joy.
They gasped in TERROR!
And then they asked Jesus...to go away.

Have you ever said those words...
not to a person or a problem, but to God?

I remember saying them.
I recall years ago, someone did something that wounded me and REALLY made me mad. It was unfair, it wasn't right, and I was filled with that righteous anger that just takes over everything!

And one day, I got into a conversation with Jesus about that anger.
Jesus said to me, Ben, I understand why you're angry.
You have every right to be angry.
I said: Thank you, Jesus.

Jesus said: I know you're not ready to forgive right now.
I said: Thank you, Jesus.

Jesus said: in about six months, or maybe a year, I'm going to need you to let go of that anger.

And I said, Jesus, I don't think I can get there.
What so-and-so did to me—I'm never going to forget it.
I'm never going to forgive it.

To which Jesus said—forgiving and forgetting are two separate things. You may never forget, that’s right. But you’ll need to forgive.

And I said, I don’t think I can do it.

Jesus said to me: I’m going to need you to forgive—not for that other person’s sake, but for YOUR SAKE. So that your own soul won’t be corrupted by bitterness, Ben, so you won’t spend your future living in the past.

To which I said...Jesus—just...go away!

Why did I say it?
I wasn’t just being stubborn.
I was afraid.

Afraid of letting go of that pride and self-justification that felt so GOOD to hold onto...

Go away—more often than not—is about FEAR...
Do you remember the call of Jeremiah?
God approaches Jeremiah and God says, Jeremiah, I have appointed you to be a prophet to the nations—

And Jeremiah says, “Ah, Lord God!
Truly I do not know how to speak,
for I am only a boy.”

Why did Jeremiah tell God to go away?
Because he was afraid.
In our text for today, why did Simon Peter tell Jesus to go away?
Because he was afraid.

How many of you have ever read that classic children’s book by C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*?

Do you remember the scene in which the children first hear about Aslan, the lion?

At this point in the story, the children don’t know anything about Aslan. So Mr. and Mrs. Beaver share with them what Aslan will do:

*Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more...*

“Is—is he a man?” asked Lucy.

“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly.

“Certainly not....

Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh!” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will...” said Mrs. Beaver; “[no one]...can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking...”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “...Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”¹

Do you know what this text tells us?
That being called by Jesus—is NOT SAFE!

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Jesus just gave Peter and his friends the biggest catch of fish they've ever had, this after a full night of catching nothing. Peter knows that Jesus isn't just someone who gives him good advice to help him manage his life, solve a problem, 7 steps to your best life now...

Jesus is someone who will OVERTURN Peter's life.
He'll ask Peter to die to an old life and rise to a new one!
So Peter says to Jesus: Go away!

Of course, the question for us this morning is what will we say?

If Jesus is calling us to look at uncomfortable truths about our own lives—to look at our greed, or our racism, or the ways we've stopped listening to other people...what will we say?

If Jesus is asking us to make a sacrifice for someone who may never thank us for it...what will we say?

If Jesus is asking us to love in ways we've never had to love before...what will we say?

I recall reading something Anne Lamott wrote about how she became a Christian.

By the time she was 30 years old, Lamott had published 3 novels. But she also drank too much, used drugs, and was bulimic.

One night, after 7 straight days of drinking, she sobered up and went to bed.

She writes:

“...as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me,

hunkered down in the corner...

I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus...
And I was appalled.

I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think if I became a Christian...

I turned to the wall and said out loud, **"I would rather die."**

"The experience spooked me badly," Lamott says. "I thought it was just an apparition..."

But then everywhere I went,
I had the feeling that a little cat was following me,
wanting me to reach down and pick it up,
wanting me to open the door and let it in.
I knew what would happen:
you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk,
and then it stays forever."

Lamott had begun attending a Presbyterian church on and off, and one morning when she went, the sermon was garbage but the singing touched her deeply, and the joy from the people singing the songs washed over her.

"I began to cry," she writes,
"and I raced home and felt the little cat
running along at my heels,
and I walked down the dock...
and I opened the door to my houseboat,
and I stood there a minute,
and then I hung my head and said..."

“All right. You can come in.”

That, she concludes, “was my beautiful moment of conversion.”²

The moment when Jesus said to her: I’m NOT going away!
Of course, he did the same thing with Simon Peter long ago.

Peter says to Jesus, “Go away...”

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

Has it ever happened to you?
You kept pushing him away, and Jesus just kept pursuing you?
Has Jesus ever refused to take NO for an answer from you?

You see, today’s text is about call.
The call of Jesus to his first disciples.
The call of Jesus to THESE disciples.

And it strikes me that anyone in their right mind, when called by Jesus, would say exactly what Peter said all those years ago:

GO AWAY.

You mean you want me to love my enemies, Jesus?
Do good to those who hate me, bless those who curse me?
Go away!

² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Anchor Books, 1999.

You once said, “...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God...”??!!

That’s not what I signed up for, Jesus. Go away!

You want me to forgive not 7 times, but 70 times 7?

You mean you want me to put the cross at the heart of how I live my life?

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

Jesus, just...go away!

Have you ever said those words to Jesus?

The good news this morning is that Jesus won’t listen. Just like Jesus ignored Peter’s request when he said—Go away—he’ll ignore ours too.

It is the good news of the gospel that Jesus will not depart,
that he won’t leave you alone,
that he promises to stand by your side,
no matter what he’s asking you to do.

- Maybe Jesus is asking you to speak the truth, when all your friends or family want to avoid the truth.
- Maybe you’re being asked by Jesus to be patient and full of grace—to parents at your school, to patients at your office, to clients of your company...and it feels impossible these days to be patient and full of grace.

- Maybe you're being called to do what is really hard, to let go of a loved one, and trust that even when you can't hold their hand anymore, God will hold them, and God will never let go of them.

And it's hard to follow Jesus down some of the roads that Jesus call, because you don't know what's going to happen next and you can't control it and it doesn't feel safe and yet, and yet—
 if you stumble, Jesus will pick you up,
 and if you run the other way, Jesus will bring you back,
 and if you do something really selfish and stupid—
 Jesus will forgive you...

And he'll call you again.
 And he won't go away...

The great Irish poet Seamus Heaney died back in 2013, at age 74.

After collapsing on a Dublin street, he was rushed to a hospital and then taken into surgery, where unfortunately he died before the surgery could take place.

Minutes before he died, Heaney, who loved and mastered language, communicated his very last words on this earth in a text message sent to his wife, Marie.

*Two words in Latin: "Noli timere,"
 which means, "Do not be afraid."*

Heaney learned these words from Jesus.
 Heaney was raised in the Catholic Church,
 but he had his quarrels with the church,

and even with the faith.

Nevertheless, there at the end of his life,
these old words of Jesus came back to him.³

Is there anything in your life right now that Jesus is calling you to do, and you're scared to do it?

Whatever it is, I hope you remember how Jesus responded to Simon Peter.

Peter said GO AWAY...

Do you remember what Jesus said in reply?

I will pin my life on the promise of Christ's reply to Peter:
Do not be afraid.

Amen.

³ This story is told by Tom Long in his sermon, "Numbering Our Days," November 8, 2015, found at [Tom Long: Numbering Our Days - Faith & Science Series Part 7 | Day 1](#).