

GO OUT!

Preached by The Reverend Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg, July 9, 2006

5th Sunday After Pentecost

Ezekiel 2:1-7

Mark 6:1-13

It's hard to go home. I love my parents and my brother dearly and I do love being from Corpus Christi, Texas, but I could never live at home again. Back there, I'm Ivan and Lyneve's daughter the minister or Howard's sister the minister or that girl who was the commanding officer of the King JROTC unit once or that bright girl who went away to Boston for school . . . I'm not me as an individual; I'm associated and identified with other people and places and things. Even at my family's church – perhaps especially at church – I'm not first and foremost thought of as a minister; the family connections come first, then the memories of me as a singer or a handbell player come to the fore, and then someone remembers that I'm now The Reverend. I joke with my mother that I need to be the pastor there for one year to get a few major issues straightened out, but the reality is that I would have even less authority as a pastor there than usual because I grew up there. People remember me as being best friends with Leslie in the youth group or as the perfect woman for Jerry, even though the first time that got mentioned I was 13 and he was 26. No one realized I was that young – they thought I was ready to graduate from high school.

Going home means losing any independent identity one has, which is the core issue at hand when Jesus speaks in the synagogue and tries to heal and cast out demons in Nazareth. The people who knew him as a kid can't see Jesus as anyone but that kid, the carpenter's apprentice with the four obnoxious little brothers and a few sisters who might not really be Joseph's son. That, you see, is what the insulting reference to Jesus as Mary's son implies – sexual impropriety. So this rabbi who comes back to Nazareth after weeks of powerful, life changing ministry and teaching in the Galilee region suddenly loses all the authority that has been cast upon him by the evidence of his deeds simply because people cannot see beyond the images they have of him from before. Prophets are not respected in their hometowns or by their families because those old associations overpower even what is clearly authority from God – and Nazareth becomes the one place where Jesus can heal but a very few people before he must leave or risk injury. He must have taken solace from the words of God to Ezekiel even as he shook the dirt of Nazareth off his feet: ⁶“And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. ⁷You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house.”

Jesus' failure in Nazareth must have astonished the disciples, even though they themselves hadn't yet begun to understand the true nature of Jesus' power and the moral implications of his teachings. If

Jesus were truly as powerful as the other miracles among those who don't know him indicates, then why can he not work where he is well-known? And what does such failure mean?

The answer may lie in the next little story, which really is a separate scene but which serves to connect the first series of miracle stories in Mark with the second series – and also serves as a bridge to help us understand the cost of discipleship, which we will examine in detail next week.

After Jesus and the disciples leave Nazareth in abject failure, Jesus does something incredibly radical: he gives power and authority to his disciples and sends them out to exorcise demons and to heal the sick in his name. That of itself must be frightening to these 12 men, but to go out as Jesus instructs them must fly in the face of everything they've ever done before. ⁸“He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.” In other words, Jesus tells them to go out completely unprepared.

“Go out!”

Can you hear the disciples asking themselves:

Without bread for the journey? Won't we get hungry?

Without a bag? What will we carry our bedrolls and our water in?

Without money? What if we need to stay in an inn overnight? How will we pay for it without money?

In sandals? Can't we wear our hard-soled boots? Do you know how hard it is to walk on dirt and rock roads in sandals?

Only one tunic? What if we fall and that tunic tears? What will we wear then to be presentable?

“Go out!” Jesus says, “And wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If 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.”

What do you mean, if we aren't welcomed somewhere? It's customary to welcome strangers – there's a rule of hospitality! How could we not be welcomed?

For the disciples, this command to “Go out!” is the first real test of the faith they have yet to show in their discussions with Jesus. Jesus asks his followers to trust that they will have bread – food – all along the journey by telling them to leave without it. If they take it with them, they don't have to rely on others, do they? If they take their bags, then they will have what they need to stay overnight in the wilderness rather than requiring the hospitality of others. If they take money, they can fall back on buying food or wine or water, and can get a room at an inn if no one offers immediate succor – but without money, they may have to work at finding a hospitable place. Wearing sandals means that they will be exhausted more easily and run a higher risk of injury, while having only one tunic with them means that they might not be acceptable in society if something happens to that one piece of clothing.

This journey Jesus sends them on is about faith and the importance of relying on community rather than self for sustenance.

And it works.

¹²“So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”

So what does it mean to us that these heretofore dense disciples managed to do exactly what Jesus had commanded them to do – to heal and to exorcise demons despite taking nothing but one cloak and a pair of sandals for the journey?

This story is about taking a risk, ultimately. “Go out!” Jesus commands, and we are to step out in faith and do what he commands, even if we feel incredibly unprepared, frighteningly incompetent, and insufficiently educated in the ways of God. God provides, or as Joanie put on the sign this week, what God ordains, God will sustain.

When individuals step out in faith, they can accomplish amazing things. Joan of Arc, who led an army to victory as a young woman. Roger Williams, who founded the first American colony with complete freedom of religion when he left Massachusetts for Rhode Island. John Schell, who founded a church for two different congregations with the help of other leaders in this area. Frederick Douglas, who spoke out against slavery despite prejudice at every turn. Jackie Robinson, who swung a bat to break the color barrier in professional baseball even though there were places he could not stay in the same hotel as the rest of the Dodgers. Nelson Mandela, who freed an entire people. Lucy Borja, who offered sanctuary to two scared young boys from the streets of Lima, Peru, and ended up opening a center to provide safety, health care, and education for children who have been abandoned to the seamy underside of a prosperous South American city.

What amazing thing are you being called to do? I just named famous people, but Jesus commands all of us to “Go out!” to make a difference in our world. It may be something as simple as increasing your charitable giving to support a new program of Your Safe Haven* or to help fire victims like the Kiblers. It may also be something far more challenging, like going back to school to earn a teaching degree so you can share your passion for science with children and youth or going to seminary so you can become a minister. Whatever it is, know that despite any feelings of inadequacy you may have, if God is ordaining it, then he is promising to sustain it.

Groups of people can make amazing things happen when they “Go out!” in faith, too. Think of the leaders of the Underground Railroad, who acted on faith to help slaves escape to freedom when such an endeavor could earn a person a bullet between the eyes or an appointment with the end of a rope. And what of the men and women, including many of you sitting here this morning, who took the audacious step of creating a new church out of four old churches? Had you failed, it might have torn this town apart – but God ordained it and God has sustained it for almost 42 years.

Jesus is calling us to "Go out!" today. To "go out" in faith, supporting ministries that make a difference in people's lives, such as Living Waters⁺ and Your Safe Haven – and to trust that despite any politics that impede ideal operation, the ministry happens at the personal level. To "go out" in faith, remaining part of our covenant with our sister congregations in the United Church of Christ through trying times – and to live into the prophetic witness provided over the years by our constant drive to provide an inclusive table where those who have never found a place to have a relationship with God before can sit with us in safety and comfort. To "go out" in faith, developing programs and ministries of our own which will meet the needs of God's children of every age – and to trust that as we grow in faith, we will grow in our capacity to love one another such that we will always have a small church feeling even as we grow in numbers.

God doesn't call us to succeed, just to be faithful to the effort. Remember that Ezekiel wasn't very well loved and even Jesus wasn't always successful – so failure is both possible and okay. We're being asked to report for duty, so to speak. So "Go out!" this week. Prayerfully consider what it is that Jesus is calling you to do, what things he is asking you to leave behind in faith that God will sustain. And then take that risk – because you never know what wonderful things will happen when you "Go out!" in faith.

*Your Safe Haven is our local social service agency for domestic violence and drug-related crimes

⁺Living Waters is the Penn West Conference Camp and Conference Center, located just on the outskirts of Schellsburg; at one point in the mid and late 70's, the part-time pastor of the United Church of Schellsburg was also the administrator of Living Waters, which caused all kinds of problems that still resonate in the congregation on occasion.