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Luke 8:22–39

25th Message

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WILL YOU FOLLOW HIM TO THE OTHER SIDE?

SERIES: *THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

In our text today, Jesus extends an invitation to his disciples to accompany him to “the other side of the lake” to expand the sphere of his mission. This will be Jesus’ first venture into Gentile territory and it becomes a paradigm of how he intends to train us to overcome our fears that inhibit us from fulfilling the great commission—to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. The effectiveness of his training is evident in the ultimate transformation of the disciples from homebound, myopic Jews who had had little contact with Gentiles, to pioneering evangelists and church planters who fearlessly crossed every known political, geographical and racial boundary with the gospel. That radical transformation begins in this thrilling heart-stopping adventure. But it is not for the weak of heart; for those of you who get sea sick, I recommend taking Dramamine before we begin.

The text is carefully constructed in two interconnected stories, so as to shed light on each other. Joel Green notes that,

1. Both open with references to traveling to the other side of the lake
2. Both give dramatic detail of a “raging storm” Jesus must confront and overcome
3. In each Jesus issues commands over chaotic forces
4. In both calm results from Jesus’ intervention
5. Both evoke responses of fear¹

I. Stilling the Storm at Sea (Luke 8:22–25)

A. The invitation (v 22)

One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side of the lake.” (Luke 8:22a ESV)

Having finished his parabolic discourse on a sower sowing seeds in different soils, Jesus now puts the disciples to the test to discover whether they “had ears to hear.” Did they hear with a faith that perseveres? To find out he invites them to accompany him to an unknown destination on the “other side of the lake.” Being a follower of Jesus doesn’t mean that you will always know where you are going, nor what dangers you will encounter along the way. But faith requires that we obey, trusting in the one who leads us.

Venturing forth to the east side of the lake was a bold move, for this was predominantly a Gentile area replete with idolatry and demonic forces. Even the physical characteristics of the shores appeared ominous and foreboding. Bargil Pixner writes,

The steep cliffs of the Hippene, the most northern part of the Decapolis, loomed menacingly from afar. The city Hippos lay there like a fortress on the basalt plateau, resembling the head of a noble steed and looking defiantly across to Tiberius, her rival on the other side of the lake. A number of smaller villages

were lying around Hippos like little chicks gathered around the mother hen. Kursi, a fishing village in the northwestern corner of the Hippene, as the region was called, was one of the villages over which the city of Hippos held dominion. There Jesus’ boat was heading with other boats in its wake.²

B. A storm rages

So they set out, and as they sailed he fell asleep. And a windstorm came down on the lake, and they were filling with water and were in danger. And they went and woke him, saying, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” (Luke 8:22b–24a)

The journey begins in a peaceful calm. After an exhausting day of preaching, Jesus finds his way to the back of the boat and immediately falls into a deep sleep. But it isn’t long before a windstorm suddenly descends upon the lake whipping up the waves and swamping their vessel with water. Sudden storms were a common occurrence on the lake, as warm westerly winds from the sea would pick up incredible speed as they passed through the Valley of Doves and then down onto the lake below.

The disciples, some of whom were very experienced in the ways of this sea, were anything but asleep. They normally dropped their nets closer to shore near Capernaum and were not prepared for such an intense squall this far from shore. They spare no effort to save themselves, but find themselves overcome by the raging sea. As their vessel takes on more and more water, they come to a standstill and are in danger of sinking. In exasperation they turn to their sleeping rabbi and rouse him out of his sleep with desperate screams, “Master, master, we are perishing!”

In 1633 Rembrandt painted his one and only seascape, *Christ in the Storm on the Lake of Galilee*.³ In her book *Contemplative Vision, A Guide to Christian Art and Prayer*, Juliet Benner helps us enter into the scene:

Living his life in a seafaring nation, Rembrandt knew well the power of the sea and the dramatic storms of the northern European coasts. His interpretation of Jesus asleep in the boat in the storm reflects his personal experience of this. Burdened with familial and financial pressures, with personal misfortunes and sorrows later in life, Rembrandt vividly depicts the inner emotional drama of the disciples in his painting.

The dramatic use of light and dark divides the canvas into two distinct parts. To emphasize the contrast, the towering mast, resembling a cross, pitches upward in a powerful diagonal. On the left side of the painting the boat heaves on the crest of a massive wave, churning from the gale-force winds. Some of its rigging seems to have snapped off and is flapping around high overhead.

The men on the foredeck wrestle and struggle to keep the boat from capsizing; others working on the central mast trying for all its worth to reattach the violently torn and tattered mainsail that seems to have been whipped off. An oar and grappling hook flail about as well, about to be lost in the waves. We can almost hear the savage flapping of sails, the creaking of masts and hull, and the howling whistle of the tempestuous winds.

Jesus is placed in the shadowed side of the painting. Though he is in the dark, he is still available and can be touched. He is being shaken awake by one of the disciples. Others look intently at Jesus as they await his reaction. One in the foreground leans over the side of the boat, possibly seasick.

In spite of the darkness, the faces of the men on this side are lit by the same eerie yellow light that surrounds Jesus. On this side of the gigantic wave, it is relatively calm. Jesus is perfectly at peace in the stern of the boat and sleeps soundly during this terrific storm.⁴

Benner notes that there are not twelve, but thirteen disciples aboard, which may be the artist's invitation to place ourselves in the painting. Where do you find yourself?

C. Calm without, fear within

And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm. He said to them, "Where is your faith?" And they were afraid, and they marveled, saying to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?" (Luke 8:24b-25)

As Jesus awakens out of deep sleep, he immediately takes command of the situation, and "rebukes" the raging waves and the wind as if they were demon-directed. As Joel Green observes, "The Old Testament sometimes portrays the power of nature as demonic; what is of equal interest is that it is also depicts Yahweh as Lord of the sea and his power over the sea as mastery of a monstrous, evil power."⁵ It doesn't take much imagination to see behind the gale force winds the threatened powers of the underworld, trying to prevent Jesus from making an appearance on their shores. Their hope was to fill this boat up with water and drown the rabbi and his crew into the depths of the sea. Yet, with just a word from Jesus the gale force winds instantly become calm. I imagine it was a most eerie, frightening calm. As Jesus rebukes the wind, he is displaying authority and power that only God possesses. Psalm 107 reads like a script:

**Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.
He stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea were hushed.
They were glad when it grew calm,
and he guided them to their desired haven.
(Ps 107:28-30 TNIV)**

Once calm is restored, Jesus rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. As a friend of mine pointed out, it was not their fear that Jesus rebukes, but the conclusions they make about their future based on their circumstances ("we are perishing").

It is not faithless to have genuine emotions in the face of dire circumstances; Job teaches us that too, as do the lament psalms. Too many Jesus-followers equate faith with emotional fortitude, with the absence of anxiety or fear or grief. Instead, it is faith-less to draw conclusions about the plans Jesus has for us based on what we see rather than what we hear him say ("let's go to the other side").⁶

I discovered an example of the faith Jesus expected while studying Psalm 77, a psalm written by Asaph during the exile. In it he cries out with great distress, wondering if God's loyal-love has vanished forever. After giving voice to his lament, he refuses to give in to despair and forces himself to re-examine how God saved his people in the Exodus. Musing over old truths, God gives him a new insight that utterly rejuvenates his faltering faith:

**Your way was through the sea,
your path through the great waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.
You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron. (Ps 77:19-20 ESV)**

From his renewed observations in the Exodus, the poet realizes that though God's ways were hidden and mysterious (through the sea with no footprints), he was faithful to give them leaders to guide them. With these fresh insights he is able to wait on God, knowing that he will eventually lead his people out of exile by means of a new and greater Exodus with new leadership, the long awaited Messiah. This was his faith. Now far from being uncaring or aloof (as Mark records their accusation), Jesus is actually in the boat with his disciples in the midst of raging waters. And if Jesus is in your boat, as Ray Stedman once observed, "The boat will not sink and the storm will not last forever."⁷

When it was over the fear of the sea was replaced by a greater fear as the disciples wondered who this prophet really was. Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey? Who is this who does things that only the creator God is said to have done in the Old Testament? Such questions pressed in on them with more force than the tumultuous waves which had threatened their tiny boat. I'm sure their minds were anything but calm as they now glided upon the glassy sea through the stark stillness of that night with no wind to aid them or oppose them. Yet even greater wonders await them on the other side, as Jesus is about to confront an even greater storm.

II. Stilling the Storm Within (Luke 8:26-33)

A. The other side of midnight

Then they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. When Jesus had stepped out on land, he met a man from the city who had demons. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he had not lived in a house but among the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him and said with a loud voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me." For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many a time it had seized him. He was kept under guard and bound with chains and

shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert.) (Luke 8:26–29)

As Jesus sets foot in hostile pagan territory, he is confronted by a man who has been invaded by a host of demonic spirits. Luke's portrayal of the man's dark depravity is lengthy, poignant and gripping. He is nameless and exposed in his shameless nakedness. Being "from the city," he once had seen better days, but no longer. Cut off from all human contact and compassion, he now "inhabits a liminal space between worlds: human and demonic, living and dead."⁸ The only human touch he experiences comes from the brutal prison guards who curse and beat him after his innumerable escapes. Their brutality gives vent to an entire city's frustration that this public nuisance cannot be kept at bay.

As the bestial man notices a small boat coming onto his turf, he rushes in for the attack. Imagine the terror from the disciples point of view. They are within a hair's breath of being overpowered and defiled by all that is abhorrent and unclean. But everything changes as the demons within the man recognize who leads this expedition. Realizing they are outmatched, they fall down in fear and give homage to "Jesus, the Son of the Most High God."

Only now do we learn that Jesus had commanded the demon to leave the man, something that no one in the city had ever dared attempt. What follows next is as surprising as it is gripping.

B. What's in a name?

Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion," for many demons had entered him. And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss. Now a large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and drowned. (Luke 8:30–33)

Jesus asks the demon his name. The answer is Legion, which evokes strong military overtones. "Legion" was the technical name for a Roman military company consisting of several thousand troops. Yet in the presence of Jesus they look more like whipped dogs as they beg him not to send them into the abyss. Knowing Jesus will not permit them to enter another human being, they try and cut their losses with an alternate proposal of cheaper housing—pigs. Why pigs? Bargil Pixner explains the connection:

The name Legion is perhaps an allusion to the Roman legions with whose help Pompey had founded the Decapolis. Pompey came from Syria in 63 B.C. and conferred pagan-Hellenistic city rights on the Decapolis. Because of these legions the demons insist that they have the right to remain in this region, if not in people, at least pigs. Why pigs? The Canaanites had sacrificed pigs to demons. The archaeologists have found altars erected for that purpose... So this special relationship between pigs and demons becomes understandable. Moreover the emblem of one of the most famous legions, the Decima Fretensis, was that of the wild boar (cf. Isa 65:48).⁹

The scene is packed with military terminology. Besides the term "legion," which is a direct reference to Rome, Rikki Watts observes (from the same scene in Mark 5:13) that "the term 'herd,' clearly inappropriate for pigs, indicates a band of military recruits,

and 'rush' describes troops rushing into battle."¹⁰ These strong military overtones evoke Israel's memory of the Exodus with Pharaoh's elite troops drowned in the bottom of the sea. This is what Israel had been hoping and praying for since the days of her exile—"Where is he who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock?" (Isa 63:11). The answer comes that God will bring a new and greater Exodus that will end Israel's exile once for all.

**"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings forth chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick." (Isa 43:2,
16–19 RSV)**

Rikki Watts concludes that Jesus appears "as the Creator-Warrior of the first Exodus as he rebukes the chaos waters, and, in the second, this same Creator-Warrior demonstrates his ability to deliver Israel from the oppressive legion of idol-demons by drowning them into the sea."¹¹ So on the eastern shores of Galilee the Exodus is re-enacted but on a grander scale, for it is not Rome, but the devil and his demon hordes that are defeated.

In obedience to Jesus' word the spirits evacuate the man and rush into the pigs. The pigs are so startled that they rush off the rocky precipice that suddenly drops into the sea. What a sight, two thousand pigs flying off into oblivion. The demons are banished, and with their departure the land is also cleansed of every last vestige of idolatry.

What a wondrous sight this must have been for the man, a sacred sign and permanent seal of his deliverance. It would be comparable to an alcoholic seeing every bottle he had ever touched, every bar stool he'd ever sat on, every liquor sign whose neon lights had mesmerized him, and every Bud Light commercial he'd ever seen, all gathered together in one heap and in one fell swoop cast off the cliff of his city and swept away by the sea. When it was over, there wouldn't be one drinking establishment left in his city. God's intent is not merely saving isolated individuals, but nothing short of a complete restoration of all creation.

III. Stirring Up a Storm of Terror (Luke 8:34–39)

A. The good news is spread

When the herdsmen saw what had happened, they fled and told it in the city and in the country. Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. (Luke 8:34–35 ESV)

The event not only made a lasting impression on the man, but also the herdsmen who were the caretakers of the pigs. The loss

of two thousand pigs was not going to sit well with their owners. Terrified by what they have seen, they took off in a panic and spread the report of the man's deliverance far and wide. Hearing the news, people came from everywhere to see first hand what had taken place. When they arrive at the summit of the cliff they can't believe their eyes. The man who was once naked and demon possessed is now calm as the still sea, clothed and rational, sitting at the feet of Jesus (the mode of a disciple).

B. Fear and greed trump mercy

And those who had seen it told them how the demon-possessed man had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked him to depart from them, for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. (Luke 8:36-37)

As they stand speechless in shock the herdsmen fill in details of the man's deliverance. To their horror they discover the high price the community has had to bear with the loss of their herds at the bottom of the cliff. As materialistic minds begin to weigh in on the price of redemption for just one life, fear trumps mercy, and they ask Jesus to leave. Paraphrasing a line from the poem *Gadara* by John Oxenham:

Take your leave Jesus
and take this friend of thine,
you love his soul,
but we love swine.

"So he got into the boat and returned." The one who rebuked the sea, who commands demons with a word, gives way to the free will of human beings. There is no argument, no pleading. He just leaves. He will not coerce himself upon the human heart. Did you ever know you had such power over Deity? Jesus first mission into Gentile territory seemingly ends in failure. Or does it?

C. A mustard seed of obedience

The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him. (Luke 8:38-39)

As Jesus embarked in his boat, the man who had been demon possessed begged him that he might go along. But Jesus said no, you stay home and declare what great things the Lord has done for you, how he had mercy on you. The man obeyed and went throughout the whole city (Mark 5:20 adds the entire Decapolis of ten cities!) proclaiming what great things Jesus had done for him.

IV. Will You Follow Him to the Other Side?

Our text contains a treasure trove of principles for how God enlarges the human heart to embrace his world. Let me conclude with just a few, hopefully to tease you into looking deeper for more. To know and love God is to have a heart that burns with God's love for the whole world. This is not love in the abstract, but one that takes root and grows from real life experiences of having Jesus lead you into new situations where you encounter real people with pressing needs. Being mission minded is bigger than "going somewhere," it's having our eyes open to the place

God has placed us, and "imaging" his kingdom in that place. Our text gives us a paradigm of just how that happens.

1. We step out by divine invitation and leading. – God initiated this adventure by an invitation to the disciples to accompany him "to the other side" of the lake. To begin to have a heart for the whole world, God begins where the disciples are and invites them to go "to the other side," and he goes with them into that world. After the Great Commission Jesus tells them there will be no geographical or cultural boundaries they won't cross and claim for the kingdom. But, Jesus says, you will go in stages (Jerusalem, Samaria, to the outer most parts of the earth) and you must learn to wait for the Holy Spirit to lead and empower you. The Holy Spirit plays a critical role in who is sent and where they go. We don't go barging into new territory without the Lord's invitation or create five-year plans with preconceived ideas about success. Rather we humbly wait and watch to see where Jesus is going ahead of us, whether it's to "the other side" of the street, the office, the neighborhood, the state or the country. Knowing he goes before us, calms our fears and gives us courage to take that first step "to go."

2. Expect a storm of resistance. – Once we decide to follow Jesus into enemy-held territory we need to prepare for a storm of resistance from the devil. As we see the story played out, we discover the fierce storm was a sign that the enemy was threatened by the arrival of Jesus and his word. He knows his days are numbered and that all his victims are about to be liberated. Upon his arrival the demons bow down and beg like whipped dogs pleading for mercy. The storm was thus a preview of what they would find on shore. From the disciples point of view, the storm was a critical test to prepare them for the actual mission, to completely let go of control and place their trust completely in the words of Jesus. If you can't let go in the midst of the storm, you will not be able to let go on land, when the work prepared for you in advance is at hand. Any storm you are in right now is not merely something to survive; it is there to help you develop the skills you are going to need when you arrive in the new territory Jesus is preparing for you. This is why Paul tells us not to be threatened when we encounter these intimidating attacks from the evil one but "take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one" (Eph 6:16). When making an advance into enemy territory, the Roman armies held large rectangular shields over their heads as they marched in unison. The shields formed a metal canopy impervious to flaming arrows shot at the advancing army.

3. Take courage, for the battle is already won. – As the disciples made their first venture into enemy (Gentile) territory, they were confronted with evil in the extreme, a legion of demons, who held sway not only over the man, but terrorized an entire community. With just a word they, along with the pigs, were drowned in the bottom of the sea. Seeing that Jesus has accomplished the ultimate victory over evil was designed to remove their fears (the theme of these stories) and grant them the courage to go anywhere with the gospel.

In the same way, the apostles invite us to stay focused on the cross, through which "he disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Col 2:15). This truth enables us to be like Jesus in the way he treated

people in vile circumstances with compassion, while hating the evil forces that hold the person captive. As an aside, I'm impressed how little dialogue we hear from Jesus in this text. Perhaps this suggests that in order to break strongholds of evil, acts of justice and goodness must precede proclamation.

4. Rejoice for gospel offers a restoration unmatched by the world. – After Jesus' encounter with the man, his restored condition is narrated in perfect counterpoint to his depravity.¹²

Before	After
a man had many demons	the demons had gone out of the man
he had worn no clothes	he was clothed
he did not live in house but in tombs	returned to his home
he fell down before him and shouted	he was sitting at the feet of Jesus
he was out of control	he was in his right mind

This should cause us to rejoice, for wherever we go in the world, or whatever circles we happen to work in, we have something to offer that no one else has. The gospel offers a wholeness to make us fully human and brings complete restoration to shattered relationships. It's like sitting down to play poker with a royal flush in your hand.

5. Know the real point of contention with the world. – Despite the demoniac's miraculous deliverance, the community wanted none of it. Why? The answer is quite simple; it had nothing to do with differing religious views or philosophies. It was simply about money. The Gerasene community could not deny the evidence of a man's changed life, but compared to their lucrative business, the man's restoration wasn't worth the price. If we are serious about the business of redeeming lives, it will cost the citizens of a community their attachment to idols. Paul faced the same issue in Ephesus in Acts 19. When the gospel poses a severe threat to the booming business of idol making, Demetrius puts the issue clearly on the table:

“Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods” (Acts 19:25–26).

At least he was honest enough to admit the real issue. Greed trumps mercy.

6. The key to growth is not numbers, but an authentic life. – As we look at our culture with its increasing hostility to the gospel and Christian values, it is easy to get discouraged. But our text teaches that in the kingdom we are not to look at the initial response to the gospel as a measure of success. All we need is one authentic

life, a mustard seed of faith and obedience. This man not only went home to proclaim what Jesus had done for him, but Mark also adds that he continued to share his story throughout the ten cities of the Decapolis on the east side of the Jordan (Mark 5:20). Pixner tells us, “In less than four centuries a magnificent cathedral would stand on those heights. The presence of a bishop of Hippos at the very first Church Councils will bear witness of how Christianity conquered heathendom. Did the Christians of Hippos remember their first missionary by building the chapel which can still be seen at the site of his tomb-cave on the slope above Kursi.”¹³

Thus the text leaves us with the haunting question: “Where is your faith?” Having just witnessed the report from our Liberia team, allow me to ask you *the* question. Did you have the faith to believe that the offspring of the people who sat in the squalor of the building called “Titanic” are now sitting in a thriving school for 270 Liberian children? Thirty years ago Ron Ritchie, one of our pastors, had the courage to go to “the other side” by accepting an invitation to teach a Bible study at the home of the president of the Los Altos Hills Country Club. Over a two-year period seventeen people came to Christ in that Bible study, among them Peter and Carol Ross. From them came their son, Jim, who became a missionary with VisionTrust. And now Jim has spearheaded scores of people from this church laboring together to turn Titanic into a new community. Total restoration. Therein lies the power of the kingdom for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Amen!

1 Adapted from Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 331.

2 Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992), 42.

3 See Rembrandt's Christ in the Storm on the Lake of Galilee at www.wikipedia.org

4 Adapted from Juliet Benner, *Contemplative Vision, A Guide to Christian Art and Prayer* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 80-84.

5 Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 333.

6 Special thanks to Karen Downing for these insights.

7 Ray C. Stedman, *Why are you Afraid* (2010) www.RayStedman.org

8 John T. Carroll, *Luke, A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 192-193.

9 Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee*, 43.

10 Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 159.

11 Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus*, 161.

12 The chart is adapted from Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 336.

13 Pixner, *With Jezsus Through Galilee*, 46.

