Sermon
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
November 7, 2010

Jonah 1:1-10
Mark 4:35-41

The Way of the Disciple

If you are thinking we have used this passage from Mark recently you are correct. It was our text the Sunday back in June when the Davidson-Stapleton Scholars from Davidson College were with us and helped lead worship. It was part 3 of the 4 week series titled "To Be a New Church" and the following Sunday John concluded the series using Luke's version of the text that immediately follows this one, the story of the healing of the Geresean demonic, which I will also reference a little later. Our June series caused a good deal of buzz around Caldwell and from it sprang our 4x4 groups in which many of you participated. In these intentionally diverse groups 4 or 5 of us gathered for the single purpose of one member telling their story while the others listened. Based on the feedback these gatherings were very popular and many of you would like to explore a continuation of them in some form. On November 21 after worship we will have a church wide covered dish lunch in the fellowship hall where we will have an opportunity to discuss just that. So with the 4x4's having recently concluded and those "what next" discussions coming soon, consider our use of this passage from Mark today as a bookend or bracket helping to remind us of our journey together these past 5 months.

I like taking the complex and making it simple. I appreciate slogans and mottos and bumper stickers, catchy phrases that get to the essence of something greater.

Consumer product advertising does this well. We all know that Bounty is the quicker picker upper; Cheer laundry detergent can be used effectively at any water temperature because it is “All Temper-Cheer” and Visine gets the red out. If well crafted a motto or slogan can concisely boil down things that are hard to explain and convey an understandable message in just a few words. For much the same reason I like the comedian Steven Wright, the frizzy haired master of the deadpan one liner who was popular in the 70’s and 80’s. Wright is known for standing on stage, completely unanimated and in a serious voice void of emotion say things like

“Everywhere is within walking distance if you have the time”.
“I used to work in a fire hydrant factory. You couldn't park anywhere near the place”.
Or “I intend to live forever, so far, so good”.

Taking the complex and making it simple and the provocative one liner were also attributes of Jesus as he went about his ministry. He gave us the Great Commandment, Love God and Love Neighbor which for me is the gospel in one sentence. And he also tossed out some memorable lines like “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s” and “you are the salt of the earth”. For the next few minutes I want us to look at that Jesus and how Mark uses him to tell a story about loving God and neighbor. We are inclined to approach this text as another miracle story but if we dwell on Jesus performing a miracle we can miss the very real and relevant point of the story for our lives.

There are 2 important characters in this story I want to introduce you to. The sea and the other side. The writer of Mark knew what he was doing when he was crafting this text and I believe in his mind, and to the original hearers of this story (and certainly

to the disciples) the sea and the other side play vital roles. We are going to have to do a little digging to make sense of it because we are dealing with an ancient text from another culture written in another language which happens to not even be the language Jesus and his disciples spoke. I know some of you probably think I am starting to sound like a broken record but I can't help it. Just like the real estate agents mantra location location location if you are reading the Bible with me you are going to hear my mantra, context context context.

Jesus' first words, his suggestion, seem tame enough but in the context they are said and in that specific situation they are loaded. "Let us go across to the other side". I love that phrase "Let us go across to the other side". It's so provocative. I think I want that quote on my tombstone. Either that or "I told you I was sick". Anyway, so what do we need to know about this situation? What side are we on now? What is this other side? Well if you look at the preceding verses in chapter 4 we see that Jesus has been teaching in Galilee, near the Sea of Galilee. They are on their home turf. This is the area where Jesus and most of his disciples grew up and it's a comfortable setting for them. It's Jewish territory. And the other side? Well that is Gentile territory, foreign soil. The contrast is made painfully clear in chapter 5. When Jesus and the disciples reach the other side they are in what Mark calls "the land of the Gerasenes" and they are immediately confronted with the Gerasene demoniac. More on him in a minute. So the context here that is implicitly known by the disciples invited to the other side is that this isn't just any friendly invitation. Jesus is issuing a challenge. To go to the other side is to leave the safety and comfort of Galilee and set out for the unknown, Gentile territory, a place that is considered unclean to their law abiding Jewish sensibilities. Think about

that for a minute. It's a shame we don't get any of the conversations some of these disciples must have had among themselves. "Is this guy crazy?" "Why in the world would we want to go there?" This going across to the other side is no small thing.

Mark really sets this up well by his use of the sea, our other featured character. He is taking some license to get his point across because this body of water isn't a sea at all but actually a fairly small lake. In fact the Sea of Galilee is only about half the size of Lake Norman. What's going on here? This imagery would serve to produce a heightened understanding of the perilous situation to a Jewish audience. And it helps convey that this trip to the other side is not an easy pleasure cruise but in fact a hazardous journey. To the Hebrew people of this time the sea is a dangerous almost mythical place to be feared and respected. Look at the creation story. In the beginning there was chaos and then God separated the waters above from the waters below. Psalms 104 and others makes reference to the dangers of the sea and the sea monsters that inhabit it. The imagery of the book of Daniel has the 4 beasts rising from the sea. Especially interesting for this audience might be the story of Jonah, today's Old Testament text. We remember him right? He's the guy that was running from God and ended up being swallowed by a large fish. That's the kind of thing that can happen to you on the sea. But what was Jonah running from? He was trying to escape God's call to minister to foreigners. Nineveh is in Assyria which conquered Israel and sent them into exile. It wasn't just foreign, it was the enemy. See the connection? Mark is using common understanding from the Hebrew Bible to support his story.

So what has Jesus asked of the disciples in his simple suggestion “Let us go across to the other side.” Well it seems he may have been asking quite a lot from them. Let’s check back into that side conversation some of the disciples may have been having. “Has this guy lost his mind? He wants us to get in our boats, at night of all times, and cross the lake to Gentile territory?” “I just want to say right now, I do not have a good feeling about this.” Well you know what? It turns out they were right. The sea acted just as they feared it would and the other side turned out to be a weird and scary place. What they failed to factor into the equation is how things work out when you’ve got Jesus with you. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Back to this place we call the other side and this fellow they run into. We don’t know his name, we just know he is demon possessed and chained up in a cemetery. This is the demon who, when asked by Jesus for his name, he replies “My name is Legion for we are many.” Jesus casts the demons out of the man and into a herd of nearby swine who promptly run into the water and drown themselves. So the disciples and Jesus land on this other side and they are immediately confronted with a cemetery, a possessed man with not one demon but many, and just to show how truly offensive this place is to the Jewish mindset Mark throws in a herd of swine so we know this is a really unclean place. Now in the middle of all of this we do have a pretty incredible miracle performed by our hero Jesus. I don’t want to lose that. But can you see the other possibilities for this story? It’s not just what Jesus did it’s also what he is doing. So let’s recap and then see how this might actually be relevant in our own lives in the 21st century, far away from 1st century Palestine. Jesus invites his disciples to go across to the other side. It’s late in the day, the other side is foreign soil and to get there you’ve got to cross “the sea” at night. The disciples

are probably not real thrilled with this but they do it. Sure enough, the sea acts up and does what the sea tends to do in the Jewish mythology of the day and it is necessary for Jesus to intervene and calm the storm. He questions the disciple's faith and the disciples simply question. "Who is this guy?" They proceed to the other side which turns out to be every bit as bad as they might have feared it would be once again requiring Jesus' intervention to make things right.

So can we somehow locate ourselves in this narrative? Can it say something to us about discipleship and our faith in action? Let me share a little bit of my story and how this text from scripture has informed me along the way. It was 1997 and I am on an adult mission trip to the Mexican border with fellow church members. We were in Tucson and would be crossing the border into Nogales, and as preparation we studied this text together the evening before. We were led by an experienced Presbyterian Missionary co-worker who introduced us to the full context of the passage much like I have done here today. We were invited to look at this story as not just another miracle by Jesus but as a radical call to fearless discipleship. Our specific situation made it all the more real to us. We were literally getting ready to cross the border. To go across to the other side into foreign territory. And while we did not have a literal sea to cross, we each carried inside of us our own storms of fear and doubt and uneasiness about what we were getting ourselves into. We vowed to learn from our Bible study and go forth with the faith and knowledge that Jesus was with us on this journey. That, in fact, he was beckoning, inviting, us to go across to the other side.

While in Mexico, instead of moving onto other passages of scripture and doing devotionals on different texts, we stayed with the Mark sea crossing story for the entire week. We lived in it, using it as our basis for daily discussion and reflection and we studied it together with our Mexican hosts, getting their unique perspective on how the view is from the other side, and how our side can look just as scary to them. Well our mission trip ended but my journey of wrestling with this text was just getting started. I began to see discipleship in a different way. As invitation, as call, as challenge. I would reflect on this story as I considered various calls to deeper discipleship and deeper faith in God. I was led to get involved in ministry with the homeless in Charlotte and became a volunteer counselor at the Urban Ministry Center. I got involved in adult education ministry and Stephen Ministry at my church. As a Stephen Minister I had the profound experience of sharing the last few months with a terminally ill cancer patient. That was an "other side" experience for me as it didn't really come naturally (those sort of things are why we have the Veronica's of the world) but I felt led to confront that storm of uneasiness and doubt and participate in ministry in that way. Along the way I started hearing a more challenging invitation from Jesus, one that called into question my vocation and had me examining work and ministry with the truly marginalized in our society. Ultimately I left the corporate world and began working as Program Director of Mecklenburg Sentencing Services. We work with the Mecklenburg County Court system to explore and recommend alternative sentences to prison where appropriate, allowing a defendant to serve his or her punishment in the community surrounded by necessary supportive services. Unfortunately in our country we not only use prison for the violent and dangerous but we also have overloaded the system with the addicted and the

mentally ill. The cost is tremendous both in terms of money and people. I spend a good amount of time in the county jail listening to heart wrenching pain from people who's lives were broken long before they ever committed a crime. The work I do brought this story from Mark, foundational for me anyway, into even sharper focus when I realized just how often the mentally ill are relegated to jail or prison for lack of a stronger public will to provide healing and hope. It occurred to me that imprisoning our mentally ill in the US today isn't that much different from how the demon possessed madman was dealt with in the land of the Gerasenes. The crazy guy was chained up in the cemetery on the outskirts of town. Out of sight and out of mind. That's the Gospel isn't it, speaking ancient words from ancient times that somehow directly address our lives and situations in today's world. "Let us go across to the other side indeed."

Friends, Jesus has challenged us and continues to call us to the other side. You can see it happening here at Caldwell. A few months ago the Price Building was empty. Today it houses a bilingual preschool and an overflow shelter for women who have no where else to stay. God is at work, in this place and in each of our lives. But one could also argue that opening up our campus to Hispanics and the homeless is easy for this church. We are missional and a bit edgy compared to our peers. What might the other side really look like for a church like Caldwell? I might have an idea or two but it's probably best I save those for the very end of my internship. Maybe a new set of 4x4 groups can tackle that sort of question. There are plenty of stories in the bible that serve to call us to a deeper level of discipleship. It's not like our text for today is the only way to think about it. But by digging deeper and coming to a fuller understanding of what was going on in this story I believe we gain a greater understanding of what Jesus

wants us to be about. And we get a powerful image of what might be involved when we vow to put our faith into action. Jesus wants us with him, and he will stick with us. But understand that he is going to the other side. The journey may be stormy, the other side may be uncomfortable, but that is where he is going to be, and through faith in God through Jesus Christ, we can be the kind of disciples we are invited to be. Let us go the way of the disciple. Let us go across to the other side.

In the name of the Triune God

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer

Amen.