

Don't Go Away

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Don't go away.

Those can be heart-rending words from a little child in a hospital, when his parents have to leave, and clinging to them he says, "Don't go away."

Or, when a child at preschool for the first time, sobs, "Don't go away," as the parents leave.

And, most certainly when the child goes off to college or gets married and it's the parents' turn to say, "Don't go away."

As painful as those times may be, they would fade into insignificance when compared to something far worse. What if Jesus would finally give up on us in disgust, turn his back and walk away? How painful would it be then to cry out, "Jesus, don't go away!" Well, as a matter of fact, that's what we're here to do today – to call out to Jesus, "Don't go away!"

We could hardly blame him if he did. In our Gospel text we read, "Now when Jesus heard this [about the death of John the Baptist], he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself." He did it – He got in a boat and went away – went away from those who had murdered his cousin John – His partner in the divine ministry – the man Jesus had called "greater than a prophet," – a man sent by God to call the world to repentance and to prepare for the coming of the kingdom. Now he was dead, beheaded by Herod to satisfy the whim of a voluptuous dancing girl. Jesus had had it. He got in a boat and went away. And who can blame him?

He must still feel like that. The world today – and it is all too clear that we are very much a part of that world – still kills the voice that calls for morality and righteousness. Sometimes literally, from the

stoning of the prophets to the beheading of John – to the assassination of Martin Luther King – to the June killing of a pastor and his wife in Nigeria. But more often though we simply kill our John the Baptists by ignoring them. We isolate them in the churches where hardly anybody listens to them. We make fun of them, think they're "nuts," and go running off after our voluptuous dancers, or whatever else it is that pulls us away from obedience and draws us to sin.

Look around and see. It's a game these days to evade the law of the land, and some lawyers get rich helping people do just that. But the government and its laws are there by the will of God; those who make the laws and those who enforce them are as much the servants of God as any pastor, although in a different sphere. To disobey the law of the land is to disobey God – unless, of course, the laws of the land contradict the will of God. But who today regards the law as a voice from God, who even listens to law as a call from God to righteousness and obedience? Especially when so many of those called to be the servants of God are disobedient themselves. Kill the Baptist! We still do.

Look around and see. Personal and corporate morality is considered, as nothing more than social custom. Right and wrong is not regarded as something spelled out by God. It is determined rather by society. "Good" is what is acceptable to most people; "bad" is what is not acceptable to them. If society changes, then so does morality. And if anyone stands up and says, "That's wrong," they are ridiculed as old-fashioned. And they giggle at these strange people with their "hang-ups." Kill the Baptist! We still do.

When Matthew tells this story, he indicates another reason for Jesus' getting into the boat and going away. It was the press of the people making constant demands of him. Wherever He went, the sick, the crippled, the diseased, the deformed, crowded around him, calling out, even demanding, to be healed. The hungry and the poor demanded justice, even trying to make him a king so that he could feed them.

Jesus had had it, so he got in his boat and went away. And who can blame him?

He must still feel like that. The people of this world – and we are very much a part of that world – are still making demands on him. What is God good for in the eyes of this world? Clearly, if there is a God, he is supposed to protect us and make things go well for us. A character in a novel says he would believe in God if God would make the ball in a roulette wheel land on the number seven, twelve times in a row. But if God isn't going to do that, isn't going to meet our demands for health and wealth, then, as they say, "it makes you wonder," and they turn their backs on him and walk away – or scream out, "Crucify him!"

Jesus isn't here to be a miracle worker – to give us whatever we want. Jesus calls us to be his disciples, to live with him, to be happy with him under the love of God, to walk with him in love and helpfulness toward others, to work with him to rescue the world from sin and death. But we don't want that. Instead, we make demands.

Killing the voice that calls us to obedience, morality, and righteousness; rejecting the Savior while we make demands on the miracle worker; we are foolish and sinful people. We are not merely weak people who make mistakes. We are wrong. We are hardhearted. We are rebellious. And if Jesus should throw up his hands in despair and say, "It's hopeless. I give up. I quit," and get into his boat and go away, who of us could blame him?

And our text goes on, "When he went ashore he saw a great crowd . . ." The crowds, you see, had followed him on foot, walking around the lake. When his boat drew near, there they were, waiting for him. Think what that must have been like. That wasn't a happy crowd cheering like people at a political rally. They weren't screaming and jumping up and down like groupies or rock fans. They were quiet – so very quiet – waiting for Him with all the quiet desperation of the hungry. Physically hungry – yes they were – for it had been a longer walk than they had expected, and apparently few had brought along anything to eat. But that physical hunger was only symptomatic of a much deeper hunger. They were hungry for healing – for healing of their crippled and diseased bodies – hungry even more for the healing of their souls – if only they could know forgiveness for their torn and fearful consciences. Hungry for meaning, hungry to find

some point to all the suffering and loneliness, hungry for some meaning that death would not make absurd. Hungry!

When Jesus saw that silent, hungry throng, what did he do? If that had been me, I'm afraid I would have told the disciples to turn the boat around, hoist the sail, and sail on. "I've got to get away," I would say. But Jesus didn't. Our text says, ". . . he had compassion on them and healed their sick." Then he had them sit down, and fed them – all 5,000 and more – with two dried fish and five small loaves of bread. He fed them miraculously, as God had fed Israel with manna from heaven during their wandering in the wilderness. We marvel at the miracle!

But, for myself, I marvel even more that when he saw that throng he didn't hoist sail and go away. To me, the miracle is that he had compassion. The miracle is that this Jesus, healing the sick and providing manna from heaven, is the compassion of God made flesh, dwelling among us. He is the Messiah; the Servant of the Lord, the Son of God, who came among us to give us God's forgiving love.

But we, wicked and rebellious, we nailed him to a cross and killed him. But, not even that would stop Him. It stopped John the Baptist, but it couldn't stop Jesus. Indeed, that very crucifixion became the offering up of the Lamb of God as reparation for the sins of the world – our sins. He rose again on the third day, and he is with us today. He's still healing us – healing our bodies, though we give credit to doctors and drugs. Even more he is healing our souls with the gospel of his forgiveness – here in the message – sealed to us in Baptism, refreshing us in the Holy Sacrament.

He still feeds us, though we give credit to the farmer and our own hard work. Even more, he feeds our souls with the love of God, feeds us with meaning for our lives, and feeds us with a hope for the future that not even death can deny. He does even more – He gathers us into the loving and accepting family of the church.

Remember how, after the five thousand plus were fed, the disciples gathered the fragments into twelve baskets? The fact that there were twelve baskets is surely no accident. The gathering of the fragments into twelve baskets was a sign that God is gathering his fragmented and lonely people into the caring fellowship, the loving

communion of his people – the people of the twelve tribes of Israel and of the twelve apostles. He doesn't go away, people of God. He heals us – He feeds us – He gathers us – and most importantly He saves us – did you hear that – He saves us – and He doesn't go away. So don't you go away either.

Now let's take a moment here and shift our focus. We've been identifying ourselves with that throng, with the sick – the hungry – the lonely. Let's identify ourselves with that Man in the boat. We are Jesus in the world today. The Bible says it clearly in 1st Corinthians 12:27 where Paul writes, "Now you are the body of Christ . . ." and in Galatians Chapter 3, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Brothers and sisters in Christ – we are the Man in the boat.

Like him, sometimes, so often, we want to get away. We can't stand those people any more. We've had it with those lawbreakers, the crooks, the cheats, the liars, the frauds who kill or ignore the John the Baptists of today who call us to righteousness; we can no longer stand all those sick people who steal and rob and hate and rape and murder. We've had it with all those hungry people making demands on us because they're hungry and poor while we are well fed and very comfortable. We want to get away. Sometimes we even crawl into the boat of the church thinking that's the way to get away from it all and to be at peace. But it's not. The throng is there in front of us, quiet in their desperation, sick in body and sick in soul, hungry for food – but most importantly hungry for the bread of life – for Jesus.

We are the Man in the boat. And just as God loves us – we must love others – we must have compassion. We cannot go away. We must get out of the boat and let the love of God shine through and in us. Amen.