

Go Tell It on the Mountain Mark 5: 1-20

Disclaimer: Material for this message was adapted in part from sermons found on the Sermon Central website.

In 1865, in Nashville, Tennessee, barely six months after the end of the Civil War, three men associated with the American Missionary Board and the Freedmen's Bureau, bought land and barracks that had formerly housed the Union Army, to establish the Fisk School in Nashville for Black people. Their first class of students ranged in age from seven to seventy, but shared common experiences of slavery and poverty — and an extraordinary thirst for learning.

One of the school's first professors and the church choir director, was a former slave named John Wesley Work. His son J.W. Work Jr. grew up on campus singing in the choir and in his turn, became a Professor at Fisk. But J.W. Jr. also developed a deep interest in collecting and preserving, before they disappeared, all the songs that had been sung by slaves. This proved to be a daunting task because such songs were most often passed down orally, from plantation to plantation; very few were ever written down. But J.W. Jr. succeeded in eventually publishing two volumes of "Songs of the American Negro." Two of his more famous collected pieces were, "This Little Light of Mine," and "Go, Tell It on the Mountain."

Then, in 1871, with the Fisk School nearly bankrupt, both John Sr. and Jr. took all the money left in the school's treasury box and formed a touring musical group named, "The Jubilee Singers," to raise desperately needed funds. At first they would not sing any of the collected Negro Spirituals for white audiences, but being urged to do so, this music became so popular, that the group went from singing no spirituals, to only singing spirituals and their tour ended as a financial success. For these reasons, Fisk University still exists today as a prestigious black college and we all get to sing "This Little Light of Mine," and "Go, Tell It on the Mountain."

Speaking of parental legacies, you should know that John Wesley Work III continued his father's and grandfather's work, not only as a musician and a composer of original musical pieces, but also as a career professor at Fisk University, carrying on their work of researching and publishing Negro Spirituals. But let's get back to these two songs.

It is easy to guess the source of "This Little Light..." according to Jesus' teaching, *that we should let our light shine before others so that they might see our good works and give glory to God in Heaven* (Mt. 5:16). But the inspiration of "Go Tell It on the Mountain," is not as clear. Certainly its lyrics record the experience of the Shepherds, who having heard the angel's message and having found the baby Jesus, they then "*made widely known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.*" As expressed in the song, **they went and told**, but what does a mountain have to do with their telling?

The mountain idea probably comes from this beautiful poem of liberation and restoration found in the book of Isaiah,

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' ... Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. (Isaiah 52:7-9)

You can sense how these themes would be dear to the hearts of slaves who had long yearned to live free.

But I think there is also an episode – from the life of Jesus – that could have inspired this idea of “Go Tell!” Early in His ministry, Jesus with His newly collected disciples were ministering to large Jewish crowds gathered around the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. One night, wearied from a day of teaching, Jesus told his disciples to get in a boat and sail to the other side; He climbed in with them and fell fast asleep in the back of the boat. But while they were sailing over the lake, a fierce storm arose that was threatening to sink the boat. In a panic they awaken Jesus, who with a word calms the storm and leaves them awestruck, wondering just who this man is. In the morning they land on the eastern shore of the lake, in the region of Gerasenes. This was the location of the Decapolis cities, which were largely communities populated by Greeks, Romans, and other mostly non-Jewish people.

Stepping on shore, Jesus is immediately accosted by an unrestrainedly violent, demonically infested, madman named Legion, who having broken all restraining shackles, now lived naked among the tombs, screaming and cutting himself with sharp stones; the locals were terrified of him. Running up to Jesus and kneeling before Him, the madman shouts at the top of his voice,

“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” For he had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He replied, ‘My name is Legion; for we are many.’ (Mark 5:7-9).

Isn't it interesting that while the disciples were still wondering, the demons knew exactly who Jesus was, and what powers He held.

Then as per their request, Jesus ordered all of the demons out of the man, giving them permission to enter a massive herd of swine pasturing in the area. All 2,000 swine then ran downhill and drowned themselves in the lake.

The shepherds who witnessed this event, also **went and told** the neighboring towns what they had seen. But this time, even though seeing the former madman now clothed and in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus, the gathering crowd was apparently more upset over the death of their pigs; their loss of revenue, so they beg Jesus to leave their country. Without saying or doing anything more, as requested, Jesus and the disciples get back in the boat to leave, returning back to the west side of the lake where they came from.

As Jesus was leaving, this formerly possessed man now begged Jesus that he might go with Him. But Jesus refused him. Jesus had chosen His other disciples, many of them who were only hesitantly following Him; here was a man begging to be His follower and Jesus would not let him. Why?

Why had Jesus come all this way across the lake and after healing just one mad man, then turn around and sail back home? As Paul Harvey would say, here is the rest of the story.

But Jesus refused, and said to him, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.' And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis towns how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed. (Mark 5:19-20)

Go tell how much the Lord has done for you. Jesus never said why he had wanted to come to this side of the lake. He did nothing more than cure and then leave behind a single madman – telling him to go home and share his story – who did just that traveling through the Decapolis cities, he amazed people in telling them what Jesus had done for him. You might think this is the end of his story, for we hear nothing more of this particular person in the rest of Mark's gospel.

But, later in Marks Gospel, after a long journey north to Tyre and Sidon, returning we find Jesus walking home by way of Decapolis. And what happens here? First a crowd of people bring a deaf/mute man to Jesus for healing. Soon thereafter, we find a large multitude of people from that region, numbering over 4,000 – Gentiles? – following Jesus around apparently without having brought along any food for themselves. So, as He had done earlier on the western shore of Galilee, Jesus finds 7 loaves of bread, which He blesses, breaks, and feeds the entire crowd. (7:31- 8:10).

Who were these people, why did they now come to Jesus after earlier rejecting Him? I believe that it was the testimony of the faithful healed demoniac who brought all these people to Jesus. As instructed, he had made himself part of Jesus' Mission: *To go and tell everyone about the love and mercy of Jesus.* He was a living example of Jesus' message and power and the people responded. You could even say that this former madman had become Jesus' 13th Disciple. He didn't need to follow after Jesus, he already knew all that he needed to share the message. The people knew who he had been and saw who he was now, it was his powerful witness that now brought all these people to Christ.

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere; go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born

Every Christmas we sing this joyous carol, first sung by slaves, of how the angels sent shepherds to find the baby Jesus. But the first published version of "Go Tell it On The Mountain," contained two verses, collected from another plantation, that are not usually sung today.

When I was a seeker
I sought both night and day,
I asked the Lord to help me,
And he showed me the way.

He made me a watchman
Upon a city wall,
And if I am a Christian,
I am the least of all.

*Go, tell it on the mountain,
over the hills and everywhere;
go, tell it on the mountain,
that Jesus Christ is born.*

Those are the verses that could have been inspired by the former madman of the Gerasenes, whom Jesus left to tell his story. There is still so much of work to be done to extend The Kingdom of God. Are you ready to do your share of going and telling what wonderful things the Lord has done for you?