

50 Days Ablaze! Sermon Series 2
Sixth Mission Response – May 21, 2006
Luke 22:54-62
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“Go” Sermon: “Go and Stand Inside the Fire”

The word for this day is “Go.” Learn, Pray, Give, Tell, Send, Go. To get us into the message this morning, I’ve asked Leda to share a testimony with us. Leda was one of five that went down to New Orleans a month ago for our second relief effort there. Leda is going to tell us what it meant to her and why she responded with “going.” First, let me pray with Leda: Gracious Father, God Almighty, use Leda right now—her words, her message, her testimony, her faith—to touch and to bless our hearts so that your name is glorified and that you challenge and move all of us to take seriously that word, “Go” as it applies to our own lives. Calm and strengthen her right now and give her joy in what she shares. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

(Leda): Good morning. Earlier this week, when Pastor Barry called and asked me if I would share my testimony, I tried to prepare well for that. And the question he asked me was, “What in my life prepares me to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit?” As I thought about that, there were basically three things that I believe are core in what helps me respond to the Holy Spirit. I’ll tell you what those three things are, and then I’d like to expand on them just a little bit. One of them is daily submission. The second is a desire to be in the center of God’s will. And the third is gratitude.

The first one, daily submission: I have a habit in my life that every day before I get out of bed—and sometimes if I forget then, shortly thereafter—I say a prayer, basically saying, “Lord, I was created for your purposes, not mine, and I want to walk on the path you have for me today. Help me to do that.” And that’s basically all there is to it. I think it puts me in the right mindset to be open to what He might lead me to that day. I read a book a few years ago called *The Secret Kingdom*. It talks about how God sent Christ on this earth to introduce a new Kingdom—an invisible Kingdom. One of the principles of that Kingdom is that God will not seize control. He will govern a life only if it is constantly yielded to Him. When I read that, it gave me such a strong conviction to daily remind myself that I need to be yielded to Him everyday.

The second thing that helps me in my response to the Holy Spirit is my desire to be in the center of God’s plan for my life. There is a scripture that is really meaningful to me. It always amazes me, every time I read it—Jeremiah 29:11, “*‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord. ‘Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’*” The reason that scripture is so meaningful to me is because I grew up in a home that was not filled with hope. It was filled with a lot of darkness and despair and hopelessness. When I was only 18, I was still living at home—and I remember this like it was yesterday—I sat down on the couch in my living room, and there beside me on the table was a little paperback book entitled *Good News for Modern*

Man. As most of you know, that's the New Testament. I came from a family that had a thick Bible that never got opened. It sat on a table . . . so that was a foreign thing for me . . . I didn't really know what it was. When I opened the New Testament and started reading it . . . it's not an understatement to say that it completely altered my world. I went from being filled with hopelessness and despair to being filled with Amazing Hope and a view of the future that was filled with Light and goodness and promise. Then I had an interesting experience. As I started on my path of faith, and Christ started to transform me day by day, each day I would tune in to a preacher that I really liked to hear. His name was Malcolm Smith, and he taught me so much. I heard such an amazing message of love and acceptance and wholeness. It has continued to transform me over the years. It has been just an amazing journey that I'm sure will never end until the day I am with the Lord. At any rate, when I think about plans and what God might introduce to me or prompt me to do, I think of that scripture—that He has good plans for me, plans to give me a future and a hope. And I want to follow that plan.

The third and last thing that I think is a big factor for me is gratitude. God has blessed my life so, so much. I couldn't begin to tell you the number of things He has done for me, the number of changes He's brought about. There's a song—I don't even know who sings it—but it has the neatest lyrics, and it really sums up so much my gratitude. The words are these:

“He gives beauty for ashes, strength for fear,
gladness for mourning, and peace for despair.” [Crystal Lewis, *Beauty for Ashes*]

I've come to understand through the years that our lives are lives of great exchange. We give God our brokenness; He gives us His wholeness. We give Him our weakness; He gives us His strength. We give Him our turmoil; He gives us His peace. For that I am very, very grateful. He deserves all our thanks and praise.

(Pastor Barry): There are some powerful, powerful connections between what Leda has just shared with you and a person I want to lift up to you in a message this morning. Just tuck that away for a moment, if you will, and you'll see some strong connections here. I will suggest to you that Leda's "going" to New Orleans, or "going" up here in front of you—this was probably more intimidating to her than going to New Orleans—I would suggest to you that Leda's "going" into these places flows out of the testimony she just shared. You would not be able to "go" and do what you did today, Leda—you would not be able to "go" to New Orleans were it not for the gratitude and the seeking to be in the center of His plan. I'm going to suggest to you also that "going" is hardly ever an easy thing. "Going" to where the will of God guides us can be so frightening at times, especially when the "going" involves us in stepping out of the darkness into the fire. That's the image I want to hold before you this morning: Stepping out of the darkness and into the fire.

Open, if you will please, your Bibles to the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 22, page ____ in the pew Bibles. Let's look at someone who was willing to go out of the darkness into the fire, Luke 22, verse 54:

“Then seizing Him, they led Him away and took Him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them.”

Let's stop here for a moment. Let's cut Peter a break. We're always so hard on him for being the “denier.” But he did follow Jesus, didn't he? When the other disciples were running scared, Peter had the guts to step close enough to the fire that his face and clothes would be revealed. He at least had that courage. Continue on, verse 56:

“A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight and she looked closely at him and said, ‘This man was with Him.’”

(How did she know that? What was it about him? Most commentators would say it was probably his appearance, his clothes that gave him away as a Galilean.)

“He denied it. ‘Woman I don't know Him.’ A little later someone else saw him and said, ‘You are one of them.’ ‘Man I'm not,’ Peter replied. About an hour later . . .”

The detail of this account is amazing—hour by hour it is.

“. . . an hour later another asserted, ‘Certainly this fellow was with Him for he is a Galilean.’”

Can you just imagine around this fire everybody is beginning to whisper? Everybody is talking. It's like they are all ganging up on him. Have you ever been in a situation like that?

“Peter replied, ‘Man I don't know what you're talking about.’ Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.”

Let's pause there. Archeologists who study the old city of Jerusalem will tell us that they know today exactly where the house of the high priest was. That's where they first brought Jesus when they arrested Him. They also know where the palace of Herod and Pilate was. In between those two houses, there was a courtyard. Wouldn't you know it, that the timing of God was such that Jesus was being transported precisely at the moment when Peter was standing around the fire. Jesus was passing by just as the words were coming out of Peter's mouth a third time, “*I don't know Him.*” And the eyes of Jesus catch the eyes of Peter. Such is the timing of God. What do you think those eyes revealed? Back to the text, verse 61:

“The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. And Peter remembered the words the Lord had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.’”

What do you think that look was like—the eyes of Jesus meeting the eyes of Peter? Was it love that Peter saw in His eyes? Was it disappointment? Was it anger? Was it pity? Was it hurt? Was it compassion? I imagine it was a mixture of things, but we do know that in those eyes of Jesus there must have been great compassion. How can we know this? Because in Mark 16:7, after the resurrection of Jesus, the Marys . . . the women . . . go to the tomb, and the angel is in the tomb and tells them, *“Go and tell His disciples and Peter He’s not here.”* You know why? God is the one who told the angel what to tell the women. Can you just see God saying to the angel, “I want you to tell the women when they come, ‘Go tell the disciples,’ and make sure you tell them to ‘tell Peter.’” Can’t you just see the tenderness at the tomb—how Jesus is loving and compassionate? Just take those words in Mark 16:7 where it says ‘Go tell the disciples and Peter.’ Cross out Peter and put your name there . . . because Jesus has the same tenderness toward you that He had toward Peter. That’s how He looks at us with His eyes, even when we let Him down.

Back to the text:

“And he [Peter] went outside and wept bitterly.”

Peter couldn’t stand to be in the light any longer. It was easier to go into the darkness with his tears. Is there anyone here this morning that hasn’t been there—a time in your life when it was easier to go into the darkness than to be in the light? Is there anyone here this morning that hasn’t had a moment when it was difficult to step into the light and to let your identity be known—that you are a follower of Jesus . . . that you love Him and belong to Him? Maybe it was a time when someone you know and care for was involved in something harmful and wrong, sinful or not, and you know you should speak up and say something to them, but you know to do so you’ve got to step out of the darkness into the light, and they’ll see Whose you are. Or maybe there was a time when somebody in your life that you care for an awful lot . . . but you don’t know where they stand with Jesus Christ, and you’re afraid to say something—like what I shared with you about myself with my mother-in-law for 10 years. But you know, to talk to them about Jesus, you’ve got to step out of the darkness into the light and let it be known Whose you are—and it’s just easier to be in the darkness. Or maybe it’s our lifestyle, or our character flaws, the things we say and do, the way we act—it’s just much easier to stay in the darkness than to step into the light.

Is there any one of us here this morning that hasn’t had some moment or other when we’ve felt like we’re the ones who have let Jesus down and He’s looking straight into our eyes with His, even as the words and actions are coming out of us? And we just want run into the darkness with our tears. What do you do when that happens? What do you do when you peer over the light into the darkness? What do you do when you refused to step into the light and just

remained in the shadows, and then you regret it? Where do you turn? Can I point you to another fire? Open your Bibles to John 21:4, page _____:

“Early in the morning Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize it was Jesus. He called out to them, ‘Friends haven’t you have any fish?’ ‘No,’ they answered. He said, ‘Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.’ And when they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. And then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, ‘It is the Lord,’ he wrapped his outer garment around him (because he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish you have just caught.’”

Let me ask you: Who started that fire . . . who caught the fish . . . and who’s cooking the fish? The text doesn’t tell us. You know what my guess is, don’t you? I think Jesus started this fire. Do you know that in the gospels of Jesus Christ—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—a campfire is only mentioned twice? Only twice. Once when Peter denied Jesus. Once right here.

Would you agree with me that aroma . . . that smells have a way of conjuring up memories? The sense of smell is a powerful link to evoking memory. For example, when I smell Old Spice cologne for men, I think of my Dad. That’s my Dad’s cologne. When I smell bread baking, I think of my Grandma and my Aunt Rachel. Campfires can evoke memories too. I think that Jesus started that fire because He wanted to make sure that whenever Peter would smell the smoke of a fire, for the rest of his life, he would not shrink back into the darkness with regret or guilt. He wanted to make sure that Peter could unpack all of this. You see, I believe that what Jesus is about to do around this beach fire, this campfire, is not trying to rub it in to Peter, but He’s trying to rub it out. He wants to remove all the guilt, because Peter is of no good to Him with guilt. You are of no good to Jesus with guilt. Your “going” into the world with joy to proclaim the love of Christ is going to be less than sincere if you go with guilt, with shame, with all of your past haunting you.

Remember Leda’s testimony—she revealed that her life at home growing up was somewhat broken and without hope. And one day, she opened up a book called *Good News for Modern Man*, the New Testament of the Bible, and for the first time she found hope. And she learned that God was willing to exchange her brokenness for His wholeness, her weakness for His strength. Those are her words. You see, what Leda was telling us is that she could not go into the world with joy (as she does now) . . . she did not go into the world with peace until the Lord helped her to deal with all her past baggage. I see that’s what Jesus is doing with Peter here on the beach.

Let’s go back to the text, verse 11:

“Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish you have just caught.’ Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ None of the disciples dared ask Him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to His disciples after He was raised from the dead. When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John . . .’”

See, now He’s gone back to the original name. Now He is no longer calling him the new name, Peter. He had given him a new name when he confessed Jesus to be the Christ. “Peter” means “Rock.” It’s a noble name. Now He’s gone back to his old name before knowing Christ, ‘Simon son of John’ as if to say, ‘Let’s go back to your old character, to the old nature that’s revealed itself these last couple of days.’ “*Simon son of John, do you love me?*” Jesus is not into making us squirm to make us feel bad. He is into cleansing us. He is trying to bring about some cleansing so that Peter can give to Jesus his brokenness and Jesus can give to Peter His wholeness. That’s where “going” starts. You see, the problem with Peter was that when He stood by that first fire and the servant girl said, “You’re one of them,” the fire he was standing near revealed his outward features; it revealed who he was. The problem was that the fire inside of his heart, inside his faith, was so dim, so flickering, it wasn’t bright enough to reveal who he was in Christ. At this moment on the beach, by a second fire, what Jesus is trying to do is ignite a fire, rekindle a fire in the heart of Peter.

Three times Jesus would ask Peter, “Do you love me?” The first two times he would say, “Simon, do you *agape* me?” That’s the Greek word for love—agape—a high form of love . . . unconditional love . . . God-like love . . . Christ-like love. Do you love me unconditionally? To which Simon Peter will say, ‘You betcha!’ (Well, that’s my translation.) Then the third time Jesus asks, “Do you (not *agape* me—He changes the Greek word for love to) *phileo* me?” . . . which is a lower form of love. It’s a friendship love . . . what exists between you and me. It’s a friendship love, but it’s not as high as Godly love, unconditional love. And that’s when Peter cries. It’s as if Peter suddenly realized that what he had done the other night was so bad, so despicable, that Jesus could even doubt his friendship . . . as if he could understand Christ questioning his unconditional love, but was it so bad that He would also question him being a friend?

What Jesus is doing at this moment is He’s piercing him with the Law, with his own sin, because it’s only when we become convicted of our sin and confess it that Christ can then cleanse us. At this moment on the beach, what Jesus is trying to do is to set Peter’s heart ablaze! That’s why in Lutheran liturgy we always begin our worship with confession and absolution . . . so that we can come to grips with and become convicted by our own guilt—that’s nailed to the Cross—so that we can “go” in grace. If you don’t deal with your guilt, if you’re always carrying it around, you’re not going to be able to go out there with joy and proclaim the name of Christ with any sincerity and authenticity—right? That’s all dealt with when we confess our sins and we hear the absolution. There is no guilt and shame to be carrying around here any more. And what Jesus is trying to do here, is to set Peter’s heart ablaze, because He is about to do something

unthinkable: He says, “*Feed my sheep.*” *Feed my lambs.* In other words, ‘I’m entrusting My Church to *you.*’ What kind of love is this? As He did it with Peter, He does it with you and me. For as many times as we have let Him down, denied Him and betrayed Him . . . as He forgives us, He then entrusts us with the Gospel once again. What kind of God do we have?

When we come here to Communion, to the Body and the Blood, you know what you’re doing, don’t you? Just as Peter was invited to dine with Jesus by a campfire on the beach, you are invited to dine with Jesus by another campfire—the Sacrament, where He wants to set your heart ablaze. He wants to feed you with love and kindle you with a new fire for Him. It’s with His Word and His Sacraments that Christ sets my heart ablaze, even when it’s flickering.

Our Elders are a little bit too quick, a little too efficient—I’m not complaining!—but somebody fixed the candle this morning. During the worship service last night, this candle was struggling for air. It was just barely burning. And I used it as an example in regard to this verse, Isaiah 42:3: “*A bruised reed He will not break. A smoldering wick He will not snuff out.*” A bruised reed He will not break. A smoldering wick He will not snuff out. How’s the fire of faith in your heart right now? Is it ABLAZE!? Or is it smoldering? Last night, when one candle was burning brightly and the other was flickering, I asked which candle represents your heart right now? But the Jesus I know and love is so gentle, that when it comes to flickering faith, albeit through betrayal and denial and acts that are despicable beyond talk, He won’t snuff it out. He heals it ever so gently to bring it back to full flame. And He does that by His love and His grace and His forgiveness that we receive here in the Sacrament. There is no sin that isn’t paid for by what you will be offered freely in this meal today.

Let me share with you two more verses: John 6:37, “*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.*” All who come to me I’ll never cast out. I like that verse. You know why? I’ve told you before that I went through a faith crisis in high school when I rejected Jesus Christ. I’ve told that story many times. During that time, I nonetheless prayed to God, just in case He *was* there—didn’t want to take any chances. For that year and a half, I went through hell and emptiness. And one day we were in Illinois vacationing—my Mom and Dad in the front of the car, my brother and me in the back—and I was just praying quietly. My Mom and Dad and brother knew nothing about this. My mother would have just freaked if she had known I was in a spiritual crisis. And as I was praying, I looked out the window, and on a barn silo there was a sentence painted. It didn’t say “Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco.” It said, “*Anyone who comes to me I will never cast out.*” John 6:37. For the next year I took this verse to God, and said, “You promised, you promised. I come to you. You won’t cast me away. I hold you to this promise.”

I’m here to tell you today . . . God keeps His promises. I don’t care what you’ve done, how you’ve betrayed Him, how you’ve let Him down, God will never, never cast you away. He wants—through this Sacrament, through this worship, through His Word, through the fellowship here—to kindle the fire of your faith into a bonfire again, no matter what’s caused it to dim and flicker lately. It’s just the way His gentle grace is.

Dear ones, it is time that we stop standing outside the fire in the darkness, out of fear or guilt or whatever. It is time to step from outside the fire into the firelight and let it be known Whom we love and Whom we serve. Is there a Peter in your life who is living with guilt? Jesus is saying to you, “Go and make disciples . . . go tell them I’m alive.” Who is it that God wants you to go to this day and proclaim the wonders of His love? There have been too many times in my life that I’ve stood outside of the fire . . . too many times that I’ve preferred to stand in the shadows. There have been too many people in my life who live lives of hopelessness while I’m silent. I’m called as a child of God through His Word and Sacraments to experience “heartburn”—the burning of His love in my heart—and then to go into my world, wherever that is, and to tell the Peters in my life of the Lord’s love and grace and forgiveness that come through the Cross. Will you join me in that? Will you join me in that as a people? Will you join in me in that individually? Go and tell the Peters in your life that the Lord is alive and He holds no anger any longer for those who are in Him. In Jesus name, Amen.