Sermon Text for July 21, 2013

by Robert K. Bronkema

Jonah 1:17-2:1, John 11:38-45

“Cave-dwellers no more”

It has been such a full, exciting, brimming with excitement and enthusiastic week. Dave Russell thinks it’s funny how much fun I have during Vacation Bible School, but I love it. It is one of those times that I am absolutely convinced that at least one of those kids, I pray all 50 of them, will be impacted and will remember what took place here at this church and it will make a difference in their lives. One mom said to us as she was dropping off her kids: Can you all do this every night? It is so true that any one of our actions will make an impact upon the life of a child and it is that opportunity that drives me during this week.

I can’t thank the volunteers enough for all that you did and how you made this church a real haven for these children during the week. I know the parents felt it and and certainly the kids did. Well, back to adult Vacation Bible School today. We continue our trek through John and if any of you read ahead of time, can you come up with something that both of these Scriptures have in common?

Both of our protagonists, Jonah in our first reading and Lazarus in our second come out of caves after being delivered by the Lord. As a result of coming out of those caves they are able to perform for the Lord those tasks that they were supposed to perform all along. They were supposed to be God’s ambassador, spokesperson. And they do, but it took some time and it took a bit of a journey for both of them to do it. What they teach us, is that we are to be cave-dwellers no more. Let’s see what that means exactly.

Many things take place in a cave in Scripture and most of them are not good. After Soddom and Gamorrah Lot and his daughters spend some time in a cave to the shame of them all. David hides in a cave from Saul. Elijah hid in a cave when God calls him out in order to experience and allow God’s glory to be revealed to him. Today we find God calling us out of our proverbial shells, out of our caves in order to serve him.

**READ**

A friend of mine who is a pastor told me about an experience he had with a young family who had just gone through a difficult pregnancy. The mom had been bed-ridden for months and the delivery was especially difficult. As you would expect they were very protective of this child because they had worked hard to get it. They had a little 6 year old nephew who came over with his parents one day and was looking at the child when he said: I need to spend some time alone with Carrie.

As you can imagine the parents were not very excited, but he insisted and so they said okay and left the room with their eyes plastered to the crack in the door. The little boy went over to this newborn infant, bent down, and the mom was just about to intercept him, when they heard him whisper to the girl, Carrie, Carrie, tell me what God looks like, I’m beginning to forget.

Isn’t that why we are here today? To remember God’s presence in our midst and to see God’s face in our every day lives? For so many of us as the business of life seems to take precedence, or as medical realities or financial woes overtake us, God’s face has been a bit hazy for us. The people in Bethany certainly saw God’s face in a powerful and amazing way, as did Jonah as he goes to the Lord in prayer in the belly of a whale. Let’s look at John 11. Jesus and Martha and Mary have a conversation about who is to blame for Lazarus’ death: Lord, if you had been here maybe you could have saved him… and then we hear, again, Jesus say it is to God’s glory. Not easy to hear when your brother has been dead for 4 days.

We find Jesus standing at the cave, a large stone, it tells us has been rolled over the mouth of the cave. Does that sound familiar? And what happens next is that Jesus utters a series of 3 commands to the people, commands that we would do well to pay attention to in our lives as well. If as we said earlier that usually bad things happen in caves, and caves are where you go when you are afraid, then today our goal is to be cave-dwellers no more. We don’t want to go to any place except to our Savior when we are afraid, and we have to come out of our cave to do that.

Jesus’ first command, you can find it in verse 39: Take the stone away. The stone would have taken a handful of people to move, it would have been sealed so hard to move in the first place. It was placed there for good, never to be moved. Martha, the ever practical, careful, and meticulous one says: Jesus, you may be sad, but don’t be stupid. If you move that stone, it will smell since it has already been 4 days. It is supposed to serve as a reminder that what happens next is truly a miracle of biblical proportions.

The removal of the stone began the process of the miracle. Don’t you find yourself almost daily with stones, burdens that are too hard to move. The stone of fear that is so prevalent and reinforced by the news creates a sense of paralysis for many. You could spend your entire life trying to budge a stone that is not going to move according to what people tell us.

Some of us have different types of stones that may not be related to what we hear is happening around us. We may have heavy tomb stones over the areas of our life that we want to keep covered up from everyone around us, including God. Because what lies in that cave stinks and the removal of the stone would require change and a complete cleaning of not only that cave but our lives.

I’m tearing apart our kitchen which is why there is a big old dumpster outside of our house. I’m finding some pretty interesting things in places I never expected them to be. But they have been dead long enough that they no longer stink, but it is still nice to get them cleaned out. That is what some of us need as well, a good cleaning out. Some of us actually kind of stink because a big old rock has been placed over that area that we wish were dead, but keeps springing up. Today, Jesus’ first command to us is to take the stone away, those stones in our lives that cover up the freedom that we can have in Christ.

The second command is what: Lazarus, come out. Now, for me this is the most exciting and intriguing of all the commands. Nobody at this point knows or even dreams of what is going to happen next. It could just be the scene of a bereaved best friend wanting to see him for the last time. But this command now changes all of that.

It takes Jesus’ command to resuscitate Lazarus and get him moving. If he had been alive already, before Jesus’ words you would have thought that once the stone was moved he would come bursting out into the clearing. But it took a directed command from the Savior standing in the light speaking to the pitch blackness of the cave to get Lazarus moving.

It wasn’t enough to just move the stone. A command by the Savior was needed. This is such an important second step. I’ve spoken before about learned helplessness and how people at times have learned, truly or falsely, that they have no control over their lives. Here Lazarus has the stone removed from his cave but until Jesus calls him out, Lazarus come out, he remains in the cave. The Word of Jesus gives life in this situation just like the Word of God creates and motivates in the Creation narratives in Genesis.

Isn’t that true of us in many situations as well. The stones of failure or negative and even tragic life events have been removed from the mouth of our caves. I don’t know what cave you are in right now, although some of you I do. You have no job, a marriage is failing, the greatest longing of your life is slipping through your fingers and you begin to realize that it will never see the light of day.

But today we hear the Good News and that is that the stone has been rolled away and Jesus calls to us and says, Bob, come out of your cave. come out. come out. and come out. And we can, we are no longer dead in our sin but alive in Christ. But it takes Christ’s command to set us in motion.

We are not able to stay in the cave and see the glory of God. That’s why Jonah’s story is so powerful. He could have stayed in the whale, but it would not have made a difference in the life of the Ninevites, God’s purposes would not have been accomplished. When God says come out, it sets us in motion.

The third and final command has two commands really. What are they: unbind and let him go. Lazarus is out but it takes other people to set him loose, to set him free, to experience God’s glory and to serve him in freedom. That is what the church is about. We are not here to put stones and stumbling blocks in peoples’ way, but to remove them. We are here to tell people the good news that they can come into the light.

We are called to remove the binds, the fetters that keep people from experiencing God’s true glory. As a church we are called to heal, and to loose the bonds of injustice. What a great vision for a great family called First Presbyterian. Cave dwellers can’t do that because they can’t see to loosen the bonds of other people. Those who come out of the cave, well they have all the opportunities in the world, and in the light of Christ we are able with God’s love to set people free.

If you feel like you are dwelling in a cave, let me tell you a story, I’m sorry, but it is a story that you have heard before. You may not remember it all the time, but once you’ve heard it, it stays with you and becomes a source of comfort and strength. There was a man named Jesus, who knew about being in the cave of life. He suffered like one of us and for us. He lost his position, his status as a teacher, his safety net, his security. He lost not only his best friend, but all of his friends, in spite of all of his teachings and warnings. But then it got worse. He went on a cross and died, all of his dreams and the dreams he inspired seemed to die with him. It seemed like he was the ultimate failure.

Then they put him in a cave. Big mistake, because God can work miracles in our lives when we are in the caves. Satan thought it was over when the stone rolled over the opening. But God worked a miracle. This Jesus was raised from the dead and our sins and our lives have never been the same. Hear and believe the good news, the good story, the old story, in the name of Jesus Christ and by his blood, we are all forgiven.

So when you find yourself in your proverbial cave, cave dwelling for whatever reason, remember the story, it will help you see God’s face in case you forget. Amen.