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Sermon Title: Mission: Go Ye ... and Come Over
Scripture: Acts 16:6-10
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Acts 16:6-10

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Last week, in the middle of my sermon about the Dogwood Festival and honoring our Deaconesses, I mentioned that in my career I had preached on a garbage dump in Mexico, on a train in Peru, on a bus in India, at a casino in Kenya, at a restaurant in Manhattan, at a construction site in Boston, and on a boat in Israel. Afterward, several people said, "David, there must be a story behind each of those. Can you tell us?"

I have to be careful with my stories because I have a new book coming out in September that is full of good stories, and I want you to buy lots of copies, but I'll tell you one today about the garbage dump in Mexico.

As you know, I used to be president of Habitat for Humanity International, and one of our meetings was in San Antonio, Texas. I preached at a big church downtown on Sunday and right afterward two men came up to me and said they wanted me to go to their town right away, no delay, and they'd set up a bunch of meetings for me to speak at. I must have forgotten how big Texas was, because it was a long ride from San Antonio to El Paso.

True to their word, they'd set up all sorts of spur-of-the-moment speeches and sermons and talks and visits. One was with a Catholic priest, who asked me to go with him. The next thing I know, I'm in a truck filled with food and medical supplies that he was smuggling across the border into Chihuahua, Mexico, to the city of Juarez. We drove through slums and shacks, finally right through and around a gigantic garbage dump. Hundreds of families lived in the dump. Not *near* the dump ... *on* the dump, *in* the dump. The dump was their home, their front yard, their back yard, their playground ... and, their church.

The priest asked me to preach. It might have been 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning, mid-week, but hundreds and hundreds of people gathered to hear about Jesus of Nazareth. I preached for a long time in Spanish. I hadn't spoken Spanish since my junior year in college, but that morning, on that garbage dump, it all came back to me. I told those folks about God's love. I told them that God had hopes for them, bigger than their own hopes, and dreams for them, bigger than their own dreams. And that they were not forgotten. They were precious.

In many ways, what I was saying was bold and arrogant, unbelievable and unlikely, pie in the sky, a pipe dream, a vision of life and love and hope, a disconnect from the smells and filth and disease of life lived on garbage.

And yet, that's what we call Mission. You go where you can, to do what you must, with all your heart, with all your faith, despite ... despite everything. Despite common sense. Despite harsh reality. Despite cruelty, poverty, oppression. Despite the odds. Despite the garbage.

Today, with our Mission Board sponsoring a Mission Fair, with our special guests from around the world right here with us, this seemed like a good Sunday to preach about Mission.

What is "Mission"? If you go down to the McDonald's in the traffic circle between Dunkin' Donuts and Stop & Shop, right next to where you order your cheeseburgers, right there is their "Mission Statement." When companies produce their annual reports for stockholders, often, right there in one of the front pages, will be their "Mission Statement."

"Mission" usually means purpose, as in "What's your mission in life, your purpose?" Or it means "task" or "job" or "responsibility." As in "Mission Impossible": "Your mission, Mr. Phelps, should you choose to accept it" In other words, here's the job I need done, here's your assignment, your mission. In church life, Mission has another meaning. It's generally what we do for others. "Church work" is what we do for ourselves. Sunday School is

church work. Choir rehearsal is church work, Hospital visits, pastoral care – they're church work. What we do for ourselves. Mission is what we do for others, outside our circle, what we do elsewhere. Operation Hope is Mission. ASP is Mission. FOCI is Mission. The Dogwood Festival is mostly Mission. And that's part of what makes Christianity distinctive. From our beginning, we felt a responsibility, an urgency, a love, really, "to go ye into all the world."

That's how it all started. Jesus, in his final conversation with the disciples, the last thing Jesus said on earth was, "Go ye into all the world, make disciples of all nations, teaching them all that I taught you, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19-20) That's called "The Great Commission," or we can call it the Great Marching Orders, the Great Job Description. And it was quite revolutionary at the time.

Nowadays, every religion has a marketing department. Every religion is into globalization. Every religion is trying to "go ye into all the world and make disciples of all nations." But 2,000 years ago, Jesus was revolutionary in thinking that his ideas, his ways, his teachings, were beyond culture, beyond boundaries and borders, beyond nation and clan and tribe. And in thinking that he could cross every barrier with the Good News.

Christians were the first believers to have a mission beyond themselves, to see ourselves as universal, global. Thousands of years after Cain snidely asked God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Christianity answers with a resounding "Yes, we are!"

There's a great old missionary hymn that lays out "The Great Commission," that lays out why we reach out beyond ourselves and go all the way to elsewhere:

*We've a story to tell to the nations
That shall turn their hearts to the right,
A story of truth and mercy,
A story of peace and light.
For the darkness shall turn to dawning,
And the dawning to noonday bright;
And Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth,
The kingdom of love and light.*

Let's admit it, there's a certain arrogance to that. It is an arrogance, a conceit, a burden, a responsibility, a privilege, a love to share what we know with the world.

Nowadays, a lot of folks don't like that, shy away from it. People don't like proselytizing or evangelism. People think folks should keep religion to themselves. That's usually a reaction to bad evangelizing, bad proselytizing. People forcing their religion: shouting, intimidating, conquering, threatening, enticing, coercing. All that has been done in the name of religion. But now, just about every religion has done enough bad things that people just think, "Why not keep it to yourself, don't bother others." Why do Mission at all?

There are a couple of answers to that. One simple, one Biblical. The simple one is that if you have something good, you want to share it. Mathematicians don't keep $2+2=4$ to themselves. It crosses national boundaries and cultures. We don't keep penicillin or the newest cancer drug to ourselves. If it's good for us, we want others to at least know about it, perhaps try it, benefit from it. Even in the area of opinion or taste, we don't hesitate to tell someone about our favorite restaurant, a good book we just read, or a movie or a play.

The best definition of sharing your religion was told to me by my theology professor, Gabe Facre. He said, "It's just some hungry person saying to another hungry person, 'Hey, I know where there's some bread.'" As Christians, we know where there's some bread. And as Christians we have a longing, a desire, a mission to share that bread. That doesn't mean we're better than others. We're hungry just like everybody else. But we know where the bread is. That's why we call it "The Good News," and you can't keep good news to yourself. So one reason for Mission is that we have something good to share. The other reason, the Biblical one, is that other people want Good News in their lives, other people are just as hungry for some bread as we are, other people want to know if $2+2=4$ works for them, if penicillin works for them, if God's love in Jesus Christ works for them, if all that Jesus taught and commanded works for them.

That's what makes today's Scripture lesson so interesting. It tells about St. Paul, Christianity's first big missionary, the guy who took Jesus's Great Commission seriously and made a huge effort "to go ye into all the world ... and make disciples of all nations." In our Scripture lesson, Paul is in what we now call Turkey, traveling around from town to town, trying to tell people about Jesus, plant a few churches, keep moving, keep telling. But twice in these verses it says, "We were prevented by the Holy Spirit," prevented from preaching, prevented from even entering one province. Interesting way to put it. Prevented how? We don't know. It may have been instinct or intuition or an unfriendly border checkpoint. Or a ship that didn't sail. It may have been a dream or a vision. Paul mentions Jesus by name as stopping him. Maybe Jesus appeared with his hand in the "STOP" position. We don't

know. We only know that whatever prevented Paul from going was attributed to God's intervention.

Equally stunning is verse 9, "During the night Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia, standing and begging Paul. 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" (Acts 16:9) *Come over to Macedonia and help us.*

That's the other side of Mission. On the one hand, we want to share what we know to be good. On the other hand, others want what we have to share. We don't have to be pushy, forceful, manipulative. We don't have to put other people down. We have a good product. People want it.

I've been in a lot of hot spots and tight spots in my life: Haiti, Latin America, Africa, India. And everywhere I've been, the message of God's love in Jesus Christ is welcome. I have friends who have been in a lot tougher places than I have, and they have all agreed they never met anyone who did not like Jesus. People may not like our religion or our methods or our history or our churches or our behaviors or our attitudes. They may not like that we force Western ways upon them, Western culture, Western values, Western dress, Western music. They may not like that we come to them hand in hand with colonialism or slavery or exploitation.

But they all like Jesus. That's what we have to offer: a distinctive person, a distinctive teaching, a distinctive way of being, a distinctive relationship with God. I'm not talking about all the rules and regulations, all the dogma and doctrine, all the denominations and divisions and hierarchies and historic differences. I'm talking about Jesus. Christ is the heart of Mission.

It is Christ's message, Christ's spirit that invigorates true Mission. With all of our friends here today from the Overseas Ministries Study Center, it's a good opportunity to tell you about it. Now, I must tell you, I'm President of the OMSC, so I'm quite devoted to them. I describe it as a "think tank" for Christian Mission. Each year we bring outstanding Christian leaders to New Haven for a year of study, renewal, research, sharing. We've been bringing groups of them here every year, giving our church the opportunity to hear about Christianity on the front lines. What's it like to be a Christian in communist China, or in Vietnam or under a brutal military dictatorship in Myanmar (Burma) or in hostile Muslim areas of Nigeria or in Yemen or during civil war in the Congo?

What is like to live your faith when you are the enemy? One of our new board members at OMSC is a Greek Orthodox priest, Father Luke Veronis. Father Luke spent a decade as a missionary in Albania. I didn't even know there were Christians in Albania. We all grew up at a time when Albania was

the world's first official atheist country, a brutal, isolated, post-World War II dictatorship, so brutal, so isolated that they had nothing to do with other communist countries behind the Iron Curtain. They thought those communists were too soft, too liberal. They outlawed religion, they destroyed churches, they eliminated clergy, they punished faith. But when Father Luke went to Albania, he found people hungering up for Christ.

St. Paul had a vision of the men from Macedonia beckoning to him. "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Albania is not far from Macedonia, and father Luke heard the same cry, "Come and help us. Bring us Holy Communion. Serve us the very presence of Christ. Give us the bread we hunger for." The dictatorship had crushed the churches and stolen the crosses and tortured the clergy. But they could not take away the desire for Christ.

The other day I complimented a salesperson on her cross. "Oh, that," the person said, "that doesn't mean anything." At OMSC, in the world of Mission, we are working with people for whom wearing a cross means everything.

Mission is always at the cutting edge of the world. It was at OMSC where I first heard about people in North Africa, Muslims, and in South India, Hindus, who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, who believe in the life and teachings of Jesus, who pray to God in Jesus's name. But in North Africa they continue to go to the mosque. They pray five times a day, they fast during Ramadan, they wear traditional Muslim clothing, but they follow Christ secretly, in their hearts.

And in India, they continue the outward signs of Hinduism. They go to the temple to worship, they stand before the idols and sculptures of Hindu gods, they follow the family traditions of ancient Hinduism and family history, but their faith is in Christ. Their worship is through Christ; their prayers, their beliefs, their lives are centered in Christ.

The world of Mission is a fascinating, intriguing, provocative place. And thanks to you, this Greenfield Hill Church is front and center in that world, deeply involved, deeply committed.

The Great Commission is alive and well right here.