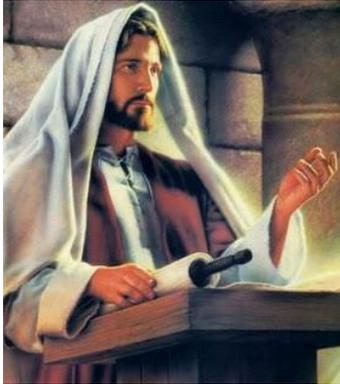


Sermon – March 6, 2016 – Lutheran Hour Sunday

*Presented on The Lutheran Hour on January 31, 2016, By Rev. Dr. Ken Klaus, Speaker Emeritus of The Lutheran Hour.*

## "If Jesus Had Stayed"

Text: Luke 4:42b-43



“And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, but he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.”

In a few weeks we will hear once again: Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! The Bethlehem manger, Calvary's cross, a borrowed and empty grave are God's demonstrations of love. They tell us the Savior has come and rescued sinful humanity. Now, by God's grace, may we all give thanks for the wonderful things the Christ has done. God grant this

response from us all. Amen.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus did some pretty magnificent miracles. Now, if you are a person who is skeptical by nature and believe some laws can never be broken, don't be overly quick to turn your ears off. In many ways this message is for you all. So, just be patient with me for a few minutes, okay? Okay. As I was saying, Luke, a physician by trade, tells of the Lord doing some incredible and hard-to-believe wonders. For example, in the fourth chapter of his chronicle of Jesus' life, he tells of how, one day, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. Luke doesn't tell us anything about the message Jesus shared that day. He only talks about an interruption which was made by a person who was possessed by an evil spirit.

Now you skeptics are probably thinking, "No doubt this fellow had some kind of mental disease and those ignorant people back then mislabeled the illness as demonic possession." If that's what you're thinking, I can tell you the ancient world wasn't entirely populated by ignorant country bumpkins who played the theme to Deliverance on dueling banjos. No, the ancient world understood mental illness and they also understood when someone was possessed. In this case, the possessed man knew things he would normally not have known; that should have been impossible for him to know. Like what things? Things like... well, Luke quotes the man. The possessed man shouts out: (Luke 4:34) "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are-the Holy One of God."

The man knew Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Even more than that, he knew Jesus had come to dedicate His life to reclaiming and redeeming the sinful and lost souls of this world. Now I know those facts about Jesus as do hundreds of millions of other believers. But back then even Jesus' closest disciples didn't know all those things about their Master. No, this demon-possessed man had information which would take a long time, and the Holy Spirit's direct intervention, for the disciples to understand.

To make a long story short, Jesus, to the amazement of the onlookers, proceeded to shut up the demon, cast him out, and restore the man. People were impressed. They were so impressed they scurried back to their towns, homes, and

villages to collect their physically, mentally, and spiritually ill friends and family members. It must have been a sight to see a long line of halt, lame, blind, and deaf heading to Capernaum to receive restoration by the Lord.

After the big day, Jesus took some time off and went to a wilderness location to pray. The townsfolk would have none of that. They found out where Jesus was, followed Him there, and pleaded with Him not to leave. Any community with any sense at all would have done the same. After all, Jesus had healed diverse diseases. If He would stay, hang out a shingle advertising His skill, it wouldn't take too long before Capernaum would become a major tourist destination for anyone who needed to be cured of something.

Although the Savior lives with us still in Word and Sacrament, has the thought ever occurred to you how wonderful it would have been if Jesus had physically not moved on? For different reasons, both believers and unbelievers have often expressed the wish that Jesus ought to have stayed and made Himself available to them.

"Think of it," believers often muse, "how wonderful it would be for us actually to see Jesus! With indifference and godlessness and wickedness growing, wouldn't it be wonderful if Jesus were still on earth? He could deliver a television sermon which could be watched by most of the world. In that sermon He could tell us which church is right and which church is wrong in its doctrines. He could, in a few minutes, settle many of the differences and divisions which separate us. He could tell us if there really is global warming and if the Lord actually created a Bigfoot or the Loch Ness monster.

Think about it. If Jesus had stayed, other religions wouldn't say, "He is just another prophet." People who are still waiting for the Messiah could be sure the Messiah had come and those who are believers could say, "See, we told you that He wasn't fake or a product of the disciple's overly-imaginative minds."

Which takes us to you who have absolutely no faith in the Christ; who feel that religion is a bunch of smoke, shadows, and mirrors. If Jesus had physically stayed, just imagine what you could do! Before anything else, I'm sure there would be demands... and I use that word advisedly, DEMANDS that Jesus supply a DNA sample. No, make that a LOT OF DNA samples. Blood samples, hair samples, fingernail samples; the list would go on and on. Medicine would study His miraculous and immediate healings; educators would come up with lists of questions designed to challenge His omniscience. The military would want to see how He managed to walk on water and Weight Watchers would want information on how He lived in the wilderness for 40 days without eating. Every talk show on radio and television would try to schedule Him and Barbara Walters would feature Him for an entire hour on her "Most Interesting Persons" program. Colleges would ask Him to be a Guest Professor and all the political parties would consider running Him as a candidate; and then would reject Him because Jesus always told the truth.

All of this, of course, would take place under extreme levels of protection. After all, there are many who would want to see Jesus dead. There would be the folks who thought they could become famous by putting a bullet into Jesus; there are those who would make it a religious obligation to do away with the Man Who claimed to be the Son of God. People who had committed all manner of grievous sins would feel uncomfortable until Jesus and His all-knowingness were shut down.

Yes, the entire world would sit up and take notice of a 2,000 year old Man. If Christ were here, He would be able to feed the countless millions who are starving; He could provide immediate homes for the refugees; and, with the wave of His hand, He could set right all the social problems and economic injustices which beset us. By His Divine power those who had been jailed unfairly could be released and those whose legal shenanigans had kept them free would find themselves in the hoosegow.

Think how wonderful it would be if Jesus had stayed. If Jesus hadn't left us, then we wouldn't have to worry about those lost and damned people throughout the world. Jesus would merely appear to them, perform a miracle which could be certified as legitimate by the American Medical Association, and they would believe. If Jesus were here, He could stop plagues, bring rain to the desert, and sunshine to the flooded areas of our world. He could stop tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods. He could make sure everyone got exactly what they wanted and all that they wanted on Christmas.

But Jesus has left us. And both believers and unbelievers want to know why. What possible good can there be in having the Savior leave us? Now, before we go any farther, you should know all of this imaginary wool-gathering was based on a false concept of Jesus and His work. If Jesus had remained with us, He would not have done all the things that I've talked about. Jesus would not have cured the world of cancer, or AIDS, or heart disease. After all, He didn't cure all the lepers, all the blind, all the lame, and all the deaf in His own day.

If Jesus had remained on earth, He would not have instantly hammered together ten million Habitat-for-Humanity homes. He would not begin a Divinely-funded social security program for everyone in need. He did not do those things when He was on earth. When He walked among us, Jesus did minister to those in need, but He didn't bring an end to all poverty and social injustice. He did not feed all the starving or clothe all the naked. That's because those things are not the reason Jesus was born.

Born of a virgin, Jesus entered this world to be humankind's Savior from sin, death, and Satan. His Father had entrusted Him with the work of reconciling humanity to Himself. No, if Jesus had stayed with us, He would not have let Himself become a Superman, flitting here and appearing there, so that people would be forced to believe. He did not do that when He rose from the dead. Indeed, to the best of our knowledge, after His resurrection, with the exception of Saul on the road to Damascus, it was only His followers who saw Him. Jesus did not confront Annas, Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin; He did not lecture Pontus Pilate about not condemning innocent people to death. He did not go to any of these and force them to touch His wounded hands and feet. Jesus did not appear to the Roman emperor and say, "Buddy, there's only room for one king here, and it's not you."

If Jesus had stayed, there is no reason for us to believe that He would, like a trained seal, do miracles on command for the unbelievers of the world. He didn't do that when He was here. At His trial, when Herod challenged Him to perform a miracle, Jesus rejected that option, even though doing so might have meant saving His life. When others asked Him to perform something cool, He refused to satisfy their curiosity.

Jesus never had the desire to make the cover of People, the National Enquirer, or even Wine Spectator. Jesus never considered it His duty to correct ALL of the world's inequity. He did not come into this world to free people from decision, from choice, from

responsibility. If that had been His intention, He could have avoided His trip to earth altogether. He could have waved His hand in heaven and changed those things. More likely, seeing the magnitude of sin, He would have waved His hand and destroyed everything so He could begin from scratch.

Would it be nice if Jesus had stayed with us? From our perspective the answer might be, "yes." From His point of view, the answer is a clear and emphatic "No." You see, God wants to be loved, worshipped, and respected. But God doesn't want anyone to be forced into loving, worshipping, or respecting Him. If that was His intention, He could have forced Adam and Eve to be loyal by never planting the tree of good and evil in the garden. But He wanted Adam and Eve to love Him because of their gratitude. Similarly He could have forced God's people to remain faithful in the wilderness; He could have forced Samson to behave; forced David to be faithful; forced the Kings of Israel and Judah to rule rightly. He could have, but He didn't. He knew that love which is forced is not love, it is only compliance.

That is why God doesn't want to force anyone to believe. No, He wants us to love Him because He first loved us. He wants us to worship Him because every good and perfect gift we have originates with Him. God wants worship, voluntary worship, from our hearts. That's what He has always wanted. That's what He looks and hopes for today. It is for this reason that He has taken His Son back to Himself.

Everybody has the unbelievable opportunity to do as Jesus commands. He wants to give another opportunity to His people who have been saved, who have been cleansed, who have been reconciled, who have been given the promise of eternal life. He wants to give them the opportunity to respond to Him in love by their actions, by their teaching, by their preaching, by their care of the young and the old, by their devotion to Him in all they do.

Calling us to repentance and offering us forgiveness in faith was Jesus' business. Seeing what He has done; believing He has done everything necessary to save us, it is now our business to respond thankfully. It took Jesus' departure and the coming of the Spirit for the original disciples to clearly understand they had been given the singular purpose and unique honor of glorifying the Lord through the spreading of the salvation story.

Without that Spirit they would have remained behind locked doors; they would have returned to the Sea of Galilee so they might go fishing. Without the Spirit they would have remained silent. With the departure of the Savior, they can hear His command: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and in Samaria and in the uttermost part of the earth." And what shall we witness? We shall tell a lost world, a sinful and suffering world, that all who believe on Jesus will be saved... and all who deny Him are already lost.

2,000 years ago, Jesus told an admiring crowd His job was to preach the call to repentance and share the good news of salvation which comes to all who are given faith in Him. Today He offers us the opportunity to believe and to share. He could force us to do those things, but that would hardly be love.

Years ago I heard of a dictatorial man who expected his wife to live up to certain standards which he had arbitrarily set. He had outlined, in written form, his desires. She was supposed to do this as a wife; this as a mother; and this is how she should take care of their home. As you might imagine, it was not the most pleasant of relationships

and she grew to both fear and despise him, which explains why, when he died unexpectedly, there weren't very many tears.

Time passed and this lady eventually met another man, fell in love, and was married to him. Thankfully, this man was night-and-day different from her first husband. Each day was a joyful experience and she loved helping him as he relished providing for her. One day, at the bottom of a drawer she came across the list her first husband had given her. She reviewed each item. About half-way down the list she was startled to find she was doing all of those things for her present husband. Not because she had to; not because he commanded or demanded. She did them as a response to the love he had been giving her.

My friends, you do not see Jesus physically walking among us. That is so you may be given the chance to worship and love Him Who carried your sins, died your death, and rose to give you eternal life. He does not demand you worship or love Him... He prefers to give you the opportunity. If this kind of loving Lord is someone you would like to know more about, we would be glad to be that church home for you.

Amen.