

“Our Sending God”

Genesis 12:1-4; Matthew 28:16-20

February 5, 2023

Looking it back on it now, I see I made a rookie mistake. Believe it or not, I thought I had a neat message to teach the kids that Sunday in worship about thirteen years ago. There I was standing right over there, naively asking the kids what I thought was a perfectly wonderful question which would open up their eyes. “What’s the first thing you think of when you think of church?” I asked. I admit, I was expecting the kind of insightful answers that kids just have a knack for saying. Well, if you were here that morning, you know how it turned out. I can almost see the event transpire in slo-mo even now in my mind’s eye. It was like I threw a hanging curve to a power hitter just waiting on it. I asked the question “what’s the first thing you think of when you think of church?” One of the children quickly answered “Boooooorrrriinnnnng!” Kids say the darndest things, right? John Reynolds shared with me some wisdom as he left that morning that remains with me to this day – “never ask a kid an open-ended question if you’re not willing to hear their answers.”

You know, looking back on it, maybe the root problem wasn’t entirely that it was an open-ended question. Maybe the problem was that I really wanted to ask it to us, the adults. In hindsight, I see that what I was doing that morning one of those things that you never really should do – use the children’s sermon as a means to reach adults. So, I return to that question now nearly thirteen years removed from my “rookie” mistake. “What’s the first thing YOU think of when YOU think of church?” (Hopefully it’s NOT boooooorrrriinnnnngggg, by the way☺)

Maybe some of y’all are thinking of church as this building which is, indeed glorious. And yes, in some sense, this is where the church meets but no, it’s not “the church”, not really. Not in the way the writers of the New Testament spoke of it. Perhaps some of you would locate “the church” in a shared set of beliefs. Again, you’d be close but not quite right entirely. The church does need shared beliefs because they assist our understanding of a wonderful God but they aren’t the church. Maybe you’re thinking that the church is the gathering of brothers and sisters in Christ as they congregate together to worship the Lord. You’d be getting warmer but I still don’t think you’d fully be right.

Church, in the basic New Testament sense, is a people *but specifically, it’s a people in motion*. It’s a people being sent out to minister and proclaim the name of the Lord. Church is simply this – the people of God joyfully, actively, daily going out into the world to witnessing together to the Kingdom of God through acts of ministry in Jesus’ name. That’s what church is. But too often we’ve gotten sidetracked from that, haven’t we?

We’ve made church about a thousand things other than what it’s meant to be. I wonder sometimes if all the stuff we think is “church” is just a grand, self-serving distraction. Do y’all know the term “busy work?” Too often we within the church universal engage in “busy work” to keep us sufficiently occupied to keep us from doing what, at some level, frightens us. Being sent to minister in the name of Jesus Christ. I certainly understand that. I understand that ministering to others in Christ’s name is a daunting task. Few of us doubt that God wants to send us. But when it comes to being sent, our anxieties make us natural born procrastinators. So, like I said, we come up with busy work or maybe we make excuses when it comes to being sent.

Older folks tend to say – “My circle of friends is set, I don’t encounter people like the younger folks or I don’t have the energy.” Younger folks seem to say “with the children and their activities, I just don’t have time to do anything else. Or they say “I have too much work to do.” No matter how young or how old, we all have a fairly predictable set of excuses we use. They all add up to us hearing God’s sending command and essentially saying “no, not right now.” Definitely someday, we think, when the kids are grown or I’m in better physical shape or my health issues are gone. Then I’ll gladly go wherever God calls me.

But you see to know Jesus Christ personally is to have our entire lives reoriented by Him. When we encounter the Living Lord we know deep down in our hearts that we’re know that He offers love in everlasting abundance. Provision beyond our ability to comprehend. Jesus gives us grace upon grace so that in life or in death we know that we are utterly, entirely His and that nothing in this world or what lies beyond can ever separate us from Him. But when Jesus appears and fills your heart with His love, make no mistake about it – you’re just gonna go wherever He’s sending you. *It’s irresistible*. It’s been that way since way back.

You see, God’s been sending His people since He spoke to a wandering Aramean in the land of Haran. God speaks in Genesis 12 and says to Abram: *“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to*

the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” And it all begins! God’s people are sent in motion to be a blessing to the nations.

Jesus, being fully God and desiring the same good ends as His father is habitually sending His apostles and disciples to witness to the Kingdom. Jesus gives them the ability to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Lo and behold, trusting Him, the disciples and apostles do those things that everyone thought impossible. At the ascension, Jesus says this *“you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* In His final bodily words with us, Jesus issues a sending statement! Do you see? In some powerful way, who we are as God’s people is known ONLY to the world in our being sent out to minister in His name.

So, what do we need in order to be sent? How do we overcome those nagging and perennial internal objections? What frees us from the busy work we too often make church about? In short – What gets us off our tails and into action? *I’m convinced – We must have a deep, abiding, personal relationship with Jesus!* When you really, truly encounter the majestic, wonderful presence of God in the person of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit, then we’re just like Isaiah. We leap in the air at the mere *prospect* of being sent.

In this morning’s reading, we hear Isaiah excited at the opportunity to be sent by God. But notice this – it only occurs after he’s been brought face-to-face with the grandeur of God. God reveals Himself to Isaiah and having seen God Almighty and having received forgiveness of his sins, Isaiah says, screams really loud *“Here I am Lord. SEND ME!”* You see, Isaiah’s been brought eye-to-eye with the Almighty and it’s changed him. *I don’t think it’s much different for us either.* Until we get to know Jesus, until we see His face, feel His presence in our lives, we’ll always tarry in being sent.

But you see, that’s exactly why the church does those other things I’ve been talking about over the last 5 weeks. The church gathers, educates, nurtures and equips for no other reason than to reveal Jesus to everyone. We don’t do those things simply because we’re good people or because we’re fearful of God’s wrath if we don’t. We do them because we love Jesus and somehow, in that ongoing process of gathering, educating, nurturing and equipping, the church becomes the means by which Jesus steps forward into our midst just like he did on the road to Emmaus. Maybe He appears in a Sunday school class as another member teaches us the Word. Perhaps He arrives right there alongside a casserole brought by a member who knows you’re under the weather. Maybe Jesus’ face appears as you volunteer to serve children dinner on Sunday night.

Honestly, I wish I could preach us all right there into the heart of Jesus. I can’t. I believe it takes a community of saints witnessing to one another through all the seasons of life. In that good and holy work, Jesus’ presence is made known to us. The hidden god becomes the revealed God. And in that wonderful encounter between ourselves and our Lord, we naturally find ourselves being sent out without objection; we’re sent out free from fear *because we personally know and trust the one who’s sending us.*

Make no mistake about it, if we’re not being sent, every single one of us, *then we’re not really in the church.* We might be here on a Sunday morning, but that doesn’t necessarily mean a whole lot. How does that old saying go? *“Just because something’s in the garage doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s an automobile.”* One of the great errors of 19th-20th century Christianity was this faulty belief that salvation was about consent to the church’s doctrine. Hogwash. Salvation is about Jesus and Jesus is always sending His people outward to bear His light.

In the coming year, I pray that our church will become a center of outreach to this entire community on a level it hasn’t been since I’ve been here. The Elders even now are working on exploring new ways of doing outreach here in our community. There’s excitement brewing. There’s the growing awareness that what we’ll be doing in the coming years will be different than we’ve done things in the past. But like all good things, it takes change. It’ll come with additional work. It’ll come with new faces and new challenges along the way. It’ll mean adjustments that may not always sit well with all of us. We’ll hear loud voices crying out *“we’ve never done that before!”* We’ll hear the harping that new groups associated with our church are making messes. They’re the complaints which come whenever change occurs in a church. Whenever longstanding inertia shifts under the weight of God’s desire to send us, there will always the unfortunate souls who’re so terrified of what lays ahead that they’ll say *“STOP”* even when the Spirit is saying *“GO.”*

None of it will be easy and for me to sit here and tell you that it will be is preposterous. But there is great stuff attached to these new endeavors. When we DO, by the power of the Holy Spirit, find ourselves trudging that happy road to wherever it is God's sending us, *our lives will be enveloped in joy and peace and contentment*. Here I speak from personal experience. It's an exhilarating feeling to find yourself at the intersection of the world's hurt and your God-given abilities. I first felt it working as a culinary instructor, a job I was quite content in. Then, one day, I started speaking about the things I was being taught at church. Pretty soon, I was looking forward more each day to talking about faith than I was foodstuffs. Next thing you know, I'm in seminary. A few years after that, I'm here. And it all happened because a church gathered, educated, nurtured, equipped and sent me out into the world to minister to others. When you get there, to that same place, I promise you'll be filled with the fullness of this life which can come only as we live the lives he's created us to live.

The earliest church revealed to us in Acts had amazing abilities. They cured and healed, restored sight to the blind, the fed, the tended the sheep of God's flock. They raised up life from death. I believe the church, this church, still has access to those powers. We might not be doctors or psychologists or harvesters in a literal sense, but we can do those tasks in ways the world can't quite yet imagine.

But it takes knowing Jesus. It takes trust. It takes a church family dedicated to gathering, educating, nurturing and equipping everyone of us. Folks, most importantly, it takes us being sent! *We can't hope to cure what we don't see*.

So I ask you? What part of the world's pain are you most drawn to? Chances are that's the place where you're hearing in the still small voice of God saying "Go there!" That, my friends, is a word from sending God who wants to keep you in motion, enjoying life and reflecting his Glory until the Kingdom comes.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.