

“Starting at the Ends: Messengers of the Good News”

Mark 1:1, 35-39

Isaiah 55:6-11

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Last week we began a series exploring the long-range focus of our church. We posited that how we think of church matters immensely. If we come together only to get our own needs met, we reduce ourselves to consumers; if we come as an audience or as clients who take in what the professionals have to say, we reduce ourselves to amateur Christians. In the past decade, sociologists of religion have dubbed this model of the church “the vendor-driven” or “market-driven” church. And it is pervasive in America today, across the whole theological and denominational landscape.

The alternative, for lack of a better word, has been called the “missional church.” It’s a bit of a red herring, because when most of us hear the word mission we think of outreach to the poor or perhaps old-fashioned evangelism to the unchurched. This *isn’t* what we mean by “missional.” Indeed, I’ve heard that some of you were deeply disturbed by the possibility that we were being called either to become socialist do-gooders or to go out and beat people over the head with a Bible, which I assure you isn’t the case.

What is “missional” then? I like the way Methodist Bishop Kenneth Carder put it in an address at Duke University Divinity School (“Market and Mission: Competing Visions for Transforming Ministry,” Hickman Lecture, October 16, 2001):

“The church is not the *object* of God’s mission; it is an *instrument* of God’s mission. Therefore, the role of laity is not primarily that of serving the institutional needs of the [church], but to *be* the church in the world where they work and live. A church ... shaped by God’s mission invites [us] to be part of what God is doing and where God is doing it.”

At this historic juncture in our church’s life, we have the opportunity – I dare say the responsibility -- to assess who we are and why we are here. In what ways have we succumbed to being a market-driven or “vendor” church? In what ways have we been faithful to our calling as a “missional” church, people who seek in our daily lives to “participate in Christ’s mission”? And how can we tell the difference? Our Long Range Planning Council suggests a guide for us: that we examine our identity and purpose through the lens of the historic “Great Ends” of

the church. So we're "Starting at the Ends," three Great Ends of the church: being messengers of the Good News; becoming Justice-Makers; and creating a Community for the shelter and spiritual fellowship of the children of God. Today, as we explore the first Great End, being messengers of the Good News, let us listen to the good news according to Mark, 1:1, 35-39.

Our lives tell a story

Every picture tells a story, the saying goes. How much more so does the 3-D filmstrip of our life. Every single person in the world has a narrative of their days and years on earth: we were born to loving or mean-spirited or indifferent parents, in a modest or wealthy or impoverished home. We hung out with the geeks or the popular kids or maybe nobody at all. We got caught up in the times: in world wars or cold wars or culture wars. We got married or didn't; had children or didn't; we worked in and/or outside the home; we succeeded or we failed or a little bit of both. Our stories go on, until the day we die, and even then they continue in the memories of those we love, and in the consequences of all of our myriad choices.

Every person has a story. I see it with breathtaking clarity every single time I am called on to preside at someone's funeral. When I meet with the loved ones of the one who died, I hear the stories of success and failure, of blunders and triumphs, of hysterically funny moments and moments that transformed their own lives for the sheer kindness or courage or wisdom of it. I get to ponder everything I've heard, and at the service I will weave together all these memories of this person's life, all these actions and decisions that accumulated into something so much larger than any isolated incident. It is my sacred privilege to tell this person's story, and to witness to this human being's impact on our world.

Our story as Christians

Perhaps we haven't thought of it this way, but the Lord has a story too. The Lord's story, like ours, can be remembered in its moments. The way God created the heavens and the earth, and called them good. The time God regretted creating humankind, and sent the flood to wipe us out, but saved a few to give the world a second chance. The promise God made with one single couple, Abraham and Sarah, to give them a land and a name and a multitude of descendents, even though they were too old to have children. The time that went by when God seemed to disappear, but then, when things could not get more bleak, God heard the cries of

his people, and rescued us from the hands of the Egyptians, and brought us safely across the Red Sea, and gave us manna to feed us in the desert, and commandments to guide us into their promised land. The anger God unleashed at us years later, when we willfully ignored the Lord and neglected the poor and felt proud of ourselves anyway ... and God sent us into exile, and we were humbled, and then God brought us safely home. And then, oh, then! How God himself came down to us as Jesus, and was born in a barn of all places, and grew up to be a man who taught the truth ... who touched the outcast and welcomed the sinners ... who ticked off the self-righteous religious leaders and frightened political authorities How this Jesus took on the sins of the world to himself, and died on the cross for our sake, and rose from the dead so that death would have power no more.

This is the Lord's story. It is a story not simply of moments, but of an accumulation of choices ... the sum of millennia of actions that reveal the kind of Lord our Savior is. And it is our privilege, our wild and sacred privilege, to tell the Lord's story, and to witness to the impact that the Lord's presence has upon our world. And *this* is what being messengers of the good news means to me.

Tell that story

So how do we tell the Lord's story, and how do we carry that good news into the world? Let me start with what we don't do: we don't hit people upside the head with it. I cringe at the self-righteous arrogance passing for evangelism over the airwaves and in political discourse today. For example, while I believe that Pat Robertson is a sincere Christian, I am appalled at the blithe freedom with which he purports to speak not just about God but even *for* God.

But what makes me really mad is the way such in-your-face God-talk has made many of us gun-shy about saying anything about our faith at all. If we allow fundamentalism to hijack the message of faith ... then theirs is the only voice of Christianity that's ever heard. I find that incredibly frightening ... and I also find that sad.

So how do we strike the right balance?

First, one of the most effective ways we proclaim our faith doesn't involve words at all: it is simply how we act ... every time we remember we belong to him, that we are marked as Christ's own, and then act with integrity, or hold our gossiping tongue, or question a racist comment, or track our investments for their social consequences, or show up yet one more time to visit the bed-ridden family member. Whenever we love because Christ loved us; whenever we think with the

self-emptying mind of Christ; whenever we challenge abuses of power the way Jesus did ... we are carrying his story into the world. Bishop Carder, again, considers this our primary calling as “missional” people:

“The church ... seeks above all else to LIVE the Jesus story. ... The church with a future is a church that knows who Jesus is, takes with utter seriousness what Jesus says, goes where Jesus goes, does what Jesus does, and loves those whom Jesus loves.

Our actions speak louder than words, so it’s crucial we start there. But we can’t end there. Because this is what Jesus tells his disciples his mission is: “Let us go to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do.” Sooner or later, we follow Jesus out into the world, proclaiming his message too. But how?

Why don’t we start by reclaiming our history? This congregation’s founders – WASPs in general, and Presbyterians in particular, were modest about their faith, to be sure, but they were also informed. They knew their Scripture. They went to worship faithfully. And they used God language effortlessly because it was fully integrated into everyday life.

Or we might start by getting to know God’s story more fully. We all know that God is love ... but that can become a meaningless bromide, and it doesn’t do the depth of God’s own story justice. God is love, but when is God also angry, or heartbroken, or delighted? Why did God lay down his life for us, and what does it mean that God lives in us still?

Or we might start by remembering how we learned about the Lord ourselves. It doesn’t just come on our DNA ... someone – more likely, many someones – passed this story on to you. Your parents. A Sunday School teacher. A camp counselor. A professor. A friend. Think back on how you learned God’s story, and consider doing the same.

Or we might start by pressing our comfort zone. The place to begin is probably not in your office but inside our community of faith. Teach Sunday School. Become a youth advisor. Open a meeting with prayer. Pray with a sick friend. Participate in a Bible study or group in which we talk about our faith.

Or we might start within our own circle of loved ones. Watch a VeggieTales movie or read a Bible story with your young child or grandchild, and talk about it. Reintroduce the language of faith to your supper table or at bedtime: ask something

as simple as “where have you seen God today?” Pray with your spouse or your child or friend. Out loud.

The language of faith, like any language, is always one generation away from dying out, and it is up to us to keep our language alive. Some of us will be eloquent, and some of us will stumble, and none of us will have the words exactly right, not even half the time. But like the disciples’ few loaves and fishes that Jesus takes and distributes to feed the thousands in the crowd, we offer what we have. And, as the wonderful preacher Tom Long puts it:

“God takes what we offer, takes our fragments and pieces and bits of experience and knowledge, and makes them sufficient, even abundant. Down through the years, very few Christians have been as courageous as Luther, as wise as Augustine, or as saintly as Mother Teresa, but the faith has been spread by the honest talk of ordinary Christians saying as best we can what we know and believe. Loaves and fishes? Yes, but also a banquet of testimony” (*Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 124).

God takes what we offer and makes them sufficient. And we have confidence not in ourselves, but in the tenacious power and love of God to carry the message of love and redemption and wholeness and peace into the world. Remember what he said through the prophet Isaiah? “For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, bringing seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

“We need ... to think of ourselves more than just ‘church people,’” Tom Long says. “We need to think of ourselves as more than people who go about our daily business and who have a quiet, almost secret compartment in our lives where we are religious. We cannot be human, much less faithful to God, if we keep silent. We must begin to think of ourselves – dare we claim the name? – as *witnesses*” (p. 20).

Let me close with a story. Almost ten years ago, *Tribune* columnist Mary Schmich ran a story that I could not get out of my mind. I’ve saved the clipping all these years because it meant so much to me. This is what Mary Schmich said:

“In 1969, a New Yorker named Anny Stern received a call from a woman who said, ‘I have a package for you from your mother.’ Stern was stunned.

Her mother, Mina Pachter, had died of malnutrition during World War II in a Czechoslovakian concentration camp called Terezin. Many prominent Jews were sent to Terezin thinking it was a spa, but thousands died there, ill or undernourished, and thousands more were later shipped to Auschwitz.

“Suddenly, 25 years later, Stern found herself holding this strange package from her dead mother. From it, she plucked a crumbling hand-stitched book, and opening the book, she discovered recipe after recipe handwritten by her mother and other women of Terezin. She was so shaken that she tucked the book away for several years.”

“[Years later], a reporter from *Newsday* wrote about the cookbook and its amazing sojourn from Terezin to New York. Pachter had given it to a friend in the camp to give her daughter, but it had passed through countless hands and several places before it reached its intended destination.

Eventually, the recipes were published in a book. The recipes were translated by Bianca Steiner Brown, a former Terezin inmate who became an editor at *Gourmet* magazine; and the book became the centerpiece of the luncheon at the Drake, hosted by the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

“Imagine this: elderly gaunt women sitting around a bunk bed whispering in the dark, feeding themselves with memories of potato herring dish, breast of goose and desserts made of rose hips. Imagine them jotting in ornate German script the secrets to chicken galantine (‘Take a large old hen, but do not scald her’) or the directions for stuffed goose neck (‘Sew the small side of the gooseneck [skin] together...’). Imagine these women huddled together imagining the lives they left behind: kitchens that smelled of cinnamon, tables draped in linen, families feasting on strudels and tortes and dumplings. Imagine them fortifying their souls with memories of preparing food and sharing food. Imagine them wishing what generations of women had wished before them, that they could pass on their recipes to their daughters.

“And then imagine them learning that their recipes survived the Holocaust even though they didn’t and that more than 50 years later, their food would

come alive amid the crystal chandeliers and the gold velvet curtains of the Gold Coast Room. ...

“But just as this cookbook is about far more than food, so was the lunch. Michael Berenbaum, director of the Holocaust museum’s research institute, stood before the crowd as they plunged their forks into Mina Pachter’s cake, and gave them an assignment. ‘Take the cookbook home,’ he said. ‘Put it on your kitchen shelf and look at the extraordinary mundaneness but wonderful mundaneness of your life, your kitchen. Choose one recipe, serve that dish, tell that story.’” (Mary Schmich, “Cookbook’s nourishment also good for the soul,” *Chicago Tribune*, 12/4/96).

Beloved in Christ, we have a story to tell. It is a story of good news ... a story of love handed down from generation to generation. It is a story of the faithful worshiping a living God, remembering how he took us by the hand and led us out of bondage into freedom. It is the story of bread broken and wine poured, at the cost of the one who gave his life for us. It is the story of the extraordinary mundaneness of our lives, and how God appears in them over and over and over again. Choose that story, live that story, tell that story. Amen.