

**+ Matthew 28:18-20 + The Gospel Needs to Go! + The Epiphany of Our Lord + 11 January 2009 +**

One of the neatest things about being the parent of a two-year-old is to see her excitement grow over something I might take for granted. For example, at Christmas, it was really neat to see how excited Adelaide got over the whole experience. Being as young as she is, she doesn't remember her first two Christmases, but this year she took it all in from Baby Jesus to the Christmas tree, from carols to gifts. The closer we got to Christmas, the more excited she became until it finally arrived. At that point, Christmas was the coolest thing in her life. For a parent, all the energy behind that excitement can get a little frustrating at times, but it was neat to see so much excitement over something I've sometimes taken for granted.

This morning as we celebrate the Epiphany or revealing of our Lord to the nations, we have opportunity to get excited again about something we've perhaps taken for granted. Today it's time for us to get excited again about sharing the Gospel as individuals, as a congregation, and as part of a church body spread around the world. Today we join the disciples on a Galilean hillside one spring day. There Jesus fills our weary hearts with excitement not only about his good news, but the privilege of sharing that good news with the world. We realize **THE GOSPEL NEEDS TO GO!**

It had been a whirlwind of excitement, fear and confusion, so it's no wonder Jesus had his disciples go out to the quiet countryside of Galilee. Just weeks before, Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the triumphant cries of "**Hosanna to the Son of David!**" and "**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!**" Days later he had celebrated one last Passover meal with them, before being betrayed and arrested. He had stood on trial before the high priest and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. He had been beaten, ridiculed, flogged and condemned to death on a cross, on which he died. Two friends had buried his dead body in a borrowed tomb, which was then put under the watch of a Roman guard. The disciples went into hiding.

Two days past, but on the third day, the disciples got some unbelievable reports of an empty tomb, of angel messengers and of Jesus himself appearing to the believing women. Others went to check out the tomb and also found it empty, while still others reported they had seen the Lord. Amidst all the confusion, the living Jesus appeared to them two more times that week. Jesus left them no doubt that he truly was alive!

Over the course of the next forty days, Jesus appeared to his disciples and taught them what they needed to know. At some point, Jesus had them meet him on that quiet hillside in Galilee. When he appeared to them, Matthew tells us, "**they worshiped him; but some doubted.**" The disciples didn't doubt that they actually saw Jesus, but were likely confused over all that had happened and all the appearances—never knowing when he would appear again. They were confused about what Jesus wanted them to do next, but Jesus knew. The Gospel would need to go out through them to the ends of the earth!

For the Gospel to go out into the world with such power, it had to come from One who had great authority. Jesus assured his disciples, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.**" This was a statement only the true God himself could make. At the same time he explained that as true man, this divine authority "**has been given to me.**" Jesus had every right to command, "**...Go and make disciples of all nations...**"

With this divine command, the unstoppable force of the Gospel went out into the world like a shockwave. The good news of Christ Jesus would go from that Galilean hillside to Judea and Samaria to Turkey and Italy and Spain to North Africa and Persia and Russia and South Asia to Northern Europe and England and Scandinavia to North and South America to the heart of Africa and Australia and to the Far East. That good news of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, would spread to the ends of the earth.

Amazingly, the Lord himself would not personally carry that message outside the borders of Palestine. He wouldn't call in the angelic hosts of heaven to wing his good news to every tribe, nation and people. No, that life-changing message of the Gospel was entrusted to eleven sinners and the other sinful followers of Jesus to be spread to the ends of the earth to "**make disciples of all nations...**"

As they spread the Gospel, the Holy Spirit would create faith in countless hearts and true "**disciples**" or followers of Christ would be made. That small band of eleven would grow into a number beyond counting, but the Eleven wouldn't be Christ's only proclaimers. You see, this Great Commission was given to the entire Christian Church—all believers, including you and me. When Jesus sent out his Gospel on that Galilean hillside, he was also sending it out through you and me here in central New York!

If this command is for you and me, then, what does that mean for us today? It means that we have the privilege of sharing the Gospel with people of all nations. Open your eyes and see how the Lord is bringing the world to our doorstep! People of every culture, language, social status and family history are either moving into our communities and neighborhoods or living and working there with us already. We don't have to personally travel to Malawi or India

or Japan or Brazil to take the Gospel to the world, when souls right here—familiar and unfamiliar, loved ones and strangers—are lost in the darkness of spiritual confusion and we have the Light of the Gospel to share.

We share this good news with friends and relatives and co-workers and classmates. We help share this good news through our congregation here and through our ministry up north. At the same time, we partner with other brothers and sisters in Christ through our church body—the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. With the support of our prayers and offerings, workers are trained and sent to take the Gospel to places where we cannot go whether New York or Apacheland or Zimbabwe.

So how do we **“make disciples”**? Not with some flashy display of power or with shrewd arguments, but through the same simple means or tools of God’s grace that Jesus gave to his disciples. We **“make disciples”** by sharing the very Word of God that is our breath and life. We **“make disciples”** by sharing the forgiveness people so desperately need and the free gift of eternal life through faith in Christ Jesus. We **“make disciples”** by welcoming infants to elderly into God’s holy family through the waters of Baptism connected with the Word of God for the forgiveness of sins. In these ways, we carry out Christ’s command. As happened 2000 years ago, disciples will be made by the work of the Holy Spirit creating faith in hearts through the Gospel we proclaim, but the time to do it is now!

Jesus’ command to his holy Christian Church is not something we can put off until the time or the social situation is right. It’s not something we can put off because we’re uncomfortable sharing it with people we know and love. Jesus’ didn’t say, “When you feel like it, then maybe you can go and make disciples...” He said, **“Go and make disciples of all nations...”**

First, though, we need to go to the cross and repent for those times when we have been lackluster in sharing the Gospel or thought it inconvenient. Thank God that at the cross we have forgiveness through the One who spared no effort for us. At the cross we have the motivation to be faithful Gospel proclaimers and to take advantage of every opportunity to share that Good News. At the cross we’re also assured we won’t be alone!

The very last verse of our text is what truly makes Christ’s Great Commission a reason for growing excitement in our hearts. Jesus gave this great command to us for the Gospel to go out, but he also attached a great promise, **“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”**

One of the greatest fears people have is being alone. For those going out to spread the Gospel, being left alone is an even greater fear. “What if someone rejects me or ridicules me or asks me a question I can’t answer?” “What if my friendship isn’t the same after I tell them about Jesus?” Jesus had an answer for his disciples’ doubts and concerns, and he has one for our own doubts and concerns. Jesus promises to be there with us.

**“And surely I am with you always...”** Did you notice the word **“surely”** there? That’s like Jesus taking one of those big neon arrows with the blinking lights and pointing it right at those five words, **“I am with you always...”** Then if we didn’t notice the big neon arrow pointing at those words, he emphasizes that last word **“always”** by adding, **“...to the very end of the age.”** Basically, “I’m always going to be with you to the end of time.”

With that in mind, let’s get excited about sharing the Gospel! Jesus, true God and true man revealed to the world in the flesh and revealed to us through his Word, will always be by our side. Rejection, ridicule and confusing questions won’t make a difference. It’s true our earthly relationships might change, but our relationship with Jesus won’t change. He’ll be there by our side to pick us up, dust us off and help us keep going when our Christian faith conflicts with the world. He’ll be there when we’re rejected and also when we’re received, when our message is welcomed and as his Good News goes out through us.

So are you excited yet? The Gospel needs to go and Christ wants it to go out through you. He’s by your side every step of the way and when you stumble, he’s there to forgive you again with his precious blood and the assurance of heaven. Sometimes you and I take that for granted, but like a two-year-old experiencing Christmas in all its glory for the first time, let’s get excited about that Good News and the privilege to share that Good News with the world. The mission field is waiting just outside our door. Go with Christ and make disciples of all nations! Amen.