

“God Keeps Us Around to Send Us Out”  
July 9, 2023

Isaiah 49:13-18

Matthew 9:35-10:8, 16

A few months ago, I began thinking how much of my preaching in the past year has been centered in the Old Testament—not that there’s anything wrong with that. Indeed, a common critique of those who preach is that we neglect the bulk of scripture that consists of the Hebrew Bible.

But after my twelve-week series on the minor prophets last fall and my preaching from Ecclesiastes during Lent, it seems to me that it might be good to spend a little more time listening carefully to the good news of Jesus during these summer months, specifically giving some attention to the Gospel of Matthew.

As I do this, I remember a dear yet somewhat grumpy member here who became a *former* member when, as he said to someone else, he “just got tired of coming to church and hearing about Jesus every week.” That is, of course, the risk we all take when we come to worship. Especially when I’m preaching—even when I’m preaching from the Old Testament—the chances are high that you will hear about Jesus. The probability of that only increases when I turn to the Gospels.

So be forewarned.

Now, I’m jumping into the middle of things here. Rather than starting with the account of the birth of Jesus in the first two chapters or the Sermon on the Mount in chapters five through seven, I’m taking us to chapter nine, in the midst of Jesus’ ministry. He is going from town to town, teaching and healing. One translation tells us the crowds “moved him to pity.” This is where we came into the story today—as Jesus sends out his followers.

“Go...” he says.

And they go.

Not that it’s always that easy to mobilize the followers of Jesus.

I recently heard the Rev. Andy Willis talk about Sunday mornings at his church. What he said sounded *familiar*. Willis is the minister at the English-speaking Lutheran Church in Geneva, Switzerland. And what happens there is similar to what happens here.

“When you come to worship on a Sunday,” he said, “You can count on a number of things. We will read from the Bible. We will sing a lot....There will be something delicious for coffee hour.” “And,” he concluded, “We will be asking for volunteers. We are *always* asking for volunteers...The sign-up sheets will be out every Sunday. You can count on that.”

That Lutheran congregation in Europe tries to make their appeals for volunteers inviting: “This is an easy task.” “No experience is necessary.” “It’s fun to serve with others.” “We have a great

time together,” “Your help will mean a lot.” We do the same thing here. And I’m constantly encouraging people: “Don’t seem desperate. Let the people know they’re on a winning team.”

It’s all pretty good—but it’s really different from the way Jesus went about recruiting people, isn’t it?

“I’m sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves.” And that’s just the beginning! I didn’t read the rest, where Jesus continues: They will hand you over and flog you. You will be *dragged* before governors and kings. You will be hated by all.

Wait a minute! This is a winning team? What happened to “It’s fun to serve with others?” And the Deacons think they have a hard time getting volunteers now! Imagine if we told you: “We need people to serve at coffee hour. You will be hated by all.”

Of course, the kind of “serving” that Jesus is talking about—healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, casting out demons—is not really what we have in mind when we tell you that sign-up sheets are available in Rockwood Hall. We have no “board of exorcists” here—and we can only imagine the difficulties the nominating committee would have if we did. We’re looking for a few people to usher—not heal the sick. The men of the church don’t gather once a month on a Saturday morning to go out and raise the dead—we just eat breakfast.

We shouldn’t let those first-century specifics become rigid requirements and limit what we do. Jesus is talking about actions that bring God’s wholeness to the world. These are actions that show God’s compassion. They are signs that the living God is establishing a new realm in the midst of a broken, decaying, and dying world.

And in the twenty-first century, we are called and empowered to do the same.

There is a deeper, life-giving reason for each and every thing that we invite you to do in our life together. So, we *do* need to be more up-front, more direct about what we are looking for and why.

On any given Sunday, someone is going to walk through our doors either after having barely made it through a difficult week or with a sense that the days ahead are filled with big challenges. They will be looking for a listening ear or maybe just an encouraging smile—someone, some action that reminds them that they are loved and supported by God and by this community. *That’s* why we ask you to greet people.

On any given Sunday, someone will come into this sanctuary, seeking to set themselves and their lives right once more; someone will sit here hoping for strength and renewal; someone will sit here filled with thanksgiving for just how good their life has been. *That’s* why we ask you to lead people in the worship of God and why we invite you to sing with joy in the choir.

Someday each child in this congregation will be a teenager or a young adult facing a time of decision, a time of choosing between what is right and what is easy, a time when they will discover whether or not the values they hold are strong enough to carry them. *That* is why we ask you to teach.

Someone is going to be hungry or lonely or desperate. *That's* why we invite you to serve at the Free Lunch Program.

What we are doing here—and what we do beyond this building is important to individual lives and to the life of the world. What we are doing is vitally needed work, if not always easy work. We *do* need to be more honest about what's involved here. Following in the way of Jesus Christ is a demanding way of life. It requires much and gives even more.

You know that. We just need to be reminded of this now and again.

The Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, has put this as strongly and as clearly as anyone:

You are—strange though it may seem—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of God's creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support...all of this will find its way into the new creation that God will one day make.

Walter Levin was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a form of bone cancer, and given three days to live. He survived. And Levin says that when he asked God why he survived, God answered, "I kept you around to help people."

Maybe that's the answer that we're all given. Maybe that's the call that we have all received. God "keeps us around" for the sake of others, for the sake of the world.

Or perhaps we should say that rather than "keeping us around," God *sends us out* for others. In its strongest sense, the Greek word that we translate as "sending," suggests a kind of banishing. The followers of Jesus are sent out away from the One they sought to follow, away from their teacher. They are *banished* even from the small community that they know for the sake of the world, for the sake of the lost sheep.

They don't have to go alone, however. That's good news. It's always nice to have a little company. Matthew lists the Twelve in pairs, suggesting that they went out together, with mutual support. Peter and Andrew. James and John. And there at the end of the list we learn that even Simon the Cananaean had a partner—although, of course, his partner was Judas.

Well, OK. We don't always get to choose who we'll be working with at Hope House or who we'll be teaching with in the church school. Still, the good news is that when we are sent out, we have each other.

So, remember again, the reason for this sending:

When Jesus sees the crowds, he has compassion for them, because they are—as we are—like sheep without a shepherd. They are harassed and helpless—and a more vivid translation pictures them "wounded and lying exhausted." As one person says, it is "as if wolves had harried them and left them bleeding because they had no one to lead and protect them."

I've said before that the Hebrew word for compassion, *rahamim*, comes from a word meaning "womb." *Rahamim* evokes a sense of a mother's deep love for her child. It is God telling the people through the prophet: "A mother may forget her child, but I will not forget you."

Such is the love of God. Through this motherly love, God remembers those cut off from others, remembers the poor and the hungry and the war-torn, remembers those on the margins whom polite society would like to forget—and, yes, God even remembers people like us.

The ministry of Jesus incarnated this compassion of God. Confronted with human sickness and suffering, Jesus reached out, healed, taught, and fed. His brought to other human beings the wholeness that we seek, the wholeness that God desires for all creation.

Hang around Jesus long enough—listen to him, watch him, be one who is taught, as we will be doing this summer—and you will become one who is sent out as well.

It's not always easy.

We are sent out, not as conquerors, not as the righteous judges of the world in order to impose our religious perspective on others. We are sent out to lost and wounded and exhausted sheep *as sheep ourselves*. We are sent out like sheep among wolves.

In the other gospels, after Jesus sends his disciples out, we read later on of how they returned, filled with wonderful reports of what they did. Not so with Matthew. Oh, we know they must have come back, but there are no glowing reports, no news of success. Instead, we're left with the sense that, once sent, the followers of Christ are still out there announcing good news even in the face of opposition and resistance. We get a sense that they are still out there, showing compassion with wisdom and in peace.

Sure, the followers of Christ keep getting together, keep showing up at places like this to pray, to sing, to hear, to remember—and to drink coffee and look for a few volunteers. We need to do that. We just get too weary otherwise.

But as you leave this morning, look around at everyone else.

Out our doors, into the streets, there go the followers of Christ, sent into the world.

And—good news, amazing news—you are one of them—in wisdom and in peace, a sign to this world of the compassion of the Christ.