

Bring God's Salvation to the Ends of the Earth

- I. What will be our message?
- II. How will people respond?

(Acts 13:38-48) "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. {39} Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. {40} Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: {41} "Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you." {42} As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. {43} When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. {44} On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. {45} When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. {46} Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. {47} For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." {48} When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

The year was 1986. The place, Mequon Wisconsin. The event, call day at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. My bride-to-be and I sat in the auditorium waiting to hear where in the world I would be assigned to begin my career in the Pastoral Ministry. As you might expect, there were some nervous jitters. Finally my name was called. Robert Raasch, Exploratory Mission, Houghton, Michigan. The first question in our minds? "Where's Houghton, Michigan?" Well, it didn't take us long to figure that one out. In the packet of materials that came with the call document, there was a postcard that showed exactly where Houghton is located. Houghton is just 2 miles past the End of the Earth. That's not true, of course. But I'll have to admit, it sometimes felt like it was true. The first time we drove up there, it was like, "Are we still on the map? Is this where we leave civilization behind?"

But you realize, there was a reason that my wife and I were headed to Houghton. We're headed to Houghton because of something Jesus said 2000 years ago. Just before he ascended into heaven, Jesus told his disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, (and where else?) and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Whether you define that to be: Houghton Michigan, Reno Nevada, Quezon City Philippines, Papua New Guinea, God has called you and me as Christians to take the message of his love in Christ to that place. In fact, that's why the mission statement of the Wisconsin Synod says what it does. Our mission statement says in part, *The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity.* Yes, God wants us to take his saving gospel to people around the globe. Or as the prophet Isaiah put it, as quoted by Saint Paul in our text for the day, our mission is to:

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Today, on this Mission and Ministry Sunday, we're going to take a little closer look at how the Apostle Paul carried out that mission in his day, and how it applies to our lives as well. As we do that, we'll seek to answer two questions:

- I. What will be our message?
- II. How will people respond?

Our text for the day meets up with the Apostle Paul on his first missionary journey. After sailing from the island of Cyprus to Perga in south Galatia, that is, modern-day Turkey, Paul and his companions decide to make the hundred mile trek through the mountains to Antioch of Pisidia. Apparently, that was more than John Mark, one of Paul's companions, could handle. I don't know, maybe he thought Antioch was past the end of the Earth. For whatever the reason, John Mark leaves the team and returns to Jerusalem.

When Paul and Barnabas arrive in Antioch, they go to the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath day and are invited by the local leaders to, in effect, be the guest preachers that day. So what does Paul preach about? First, he reviews for his listeners the history of the Jewish nation, how God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, settled them in the Promised Land, and promised to send them a Savior. Paul then tells them that the name of that promised Savior is Jesus, whose way John the Baptist prepared by preaching a baptism of repentance. But as Paul puts it, *"The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed."* (Acts 13:27-28). That, you might say, is the bad news. Paul goes on to the Good News when he says, *But God raised [Jesus] from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem.* Notice that Paul is building his case on corroborated eyewitness testimony. Paul is sharing with his listeners historical facts.

And the reason he's sharing all these historical facts? What conclusion does Paul come to? That's where our text for the day picks up. Paul says, *Therefore.* Therefore. In other words, because of all that has happened, because of all that God has done in Christ, therefore, here's the payoff. Paul says, *Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.* Wow! You talk about the "so what" of Paul's sermon. So what does all that ancient history mean for the people who were standing in front of Paul at that moment in time? People who probably saw themselves as fairly religious. People who were trying their best to stay on God's good side. Yet people whose consciences told them that they had still fallen short of God's standards. People who, like so many people today, were struggling with the sins they had committed time and time again. People who, in their heart of hearts, were wondering, "God, how do you really feel about me?"

It's to those people that Saint Paul says, "Here's what I want you to know. I want you to know that your sins are forgiven. Because of all that Jesus accomplished, because Jesus lived a perfect life, died an innocent death and was raised to life again, therefore, as Paul puts it, *"My brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you."* There's the "so what" of Paul's sermon. Paul is telling these people exactly what Jesus did so many years before now applies to their hearts and lives. He assures them that for Jesus' sake, their sins are paid in full, not by anything they have done, but because of what Jesus has done for them. In fact, Paul takes it one step further when he says, *Through Jesus everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.* In other words, what man's very best efforts at keeping all of God's commands could not do for a person, namely, make that person right with God, faith in Jesus does do, perfectly. St Paul says it well in Galatians 2:16. *We know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus*

Christ.

Now, what does all that have to do with our mission to bring God's salvation to the ends of the Earth? The answer is simply this, the very same message at St Paul shared with his listeners is what you and I get to share with the people of our day as well. It's a message built not on what we think or what others feel, it's built on what Jesus did. He lived a perfect life, offered it up on a cross and rose from the dead to prove what? To prove that the sins of the world are paid in full.

That's the announcement that you and I can make. No matter who we're talking to, no matter what they've done, no matter where in the world they happen to live, we can say what Saint Paul said. "Through Jesus, all your sins are paid in full." That my friends, is a powerful, life-saving message. The only question that remains is:

II. How will people respond?

Well, think about how the people responded in Paul's day. On the one hand, there were some people who were truly interested in what Paul was saying. This idea of God simply forgiving their sins without them having to make any kind of payment for those sins—well, that piqued their interest. The people basically said, "Paul, we want you to preach for us next week too. And, as Luke records, *On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.* Really, is that so shocking? Isn't there something incredibly appealing about a message of a God who doesn't treat us as our sins deserve? As pastors, we've all worked with people who, after we shared with them the essence of God's love for them in Christ, said something like, "Wow, that's amazing! Please, tell me more!" In fact, maybe you've experienced that same response when you've shared with someone the good news of a God who has come not to condemn them, but to forgive them, in Christ.

Certainly, that's the response to the gospel is receiving in many parts of the world. In places like Vietnam and China, countries where Communist governments once repressed all forms of gospel ministry. Now that the doors to the gospel are being cracked open, thirsty souls can't get enough of the gospel, that water of life. When the Hmong leaders being trained by the WELS in Hanoi, return to their villages and share what they learned, the people say, "Please tell us more. And they show them their dog eared Lutheran Catechisms which have been translated into their native language. And those same people are, in turn, are going out and telling their friends and families the Good News of God's Love in Christ. And it's having an effect. Over the past few years, that church body has grown from 65,000 to 100,000 numbers, as God the Holy Spirit leads to people to positively respond to the message of God's full and free forgiveness, won by Jesus Christ.

And yet, as you well know, not everyone responds so positively to the message of God's free grace in Christ, not in our day and not in Paul's day either. When the crowds showed up for a second helping of Paul's teaching on the next Sabbath day, how did the Jewish leaders react? Luke tells us, *When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying (Acts 13 45).*

Hmmm. things haven't changed much in 2,000 years, have they? People still speak abusively against what we believe and teach. Some say, "The WELS is too strict." Others say, "Free Grace is too easy. You have to do something to earn God's favor." In either case, those people are rejecting the truth of God's holy word. And when they do, we may have to say to them what Paul said to the Jews of his date, namely, "*We had to speak the word of God to you. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.*"

Sometimes when human beings close their hearts to the Gospel, God simply opens other

doors elsewhere. Maybe it's in Vietnam or China. Or maybe it's in Latin America, where this vast mission field is opening up to us, through the internet. Do you realize that right now there are over 1 million Latinos who are connected to Academia Cristo, which is kind of the Spanish version of the WELS Facebook page? 4000 of those followers have already signed up to take online Bible classes, taught in Spanish by WELS pastors and teachers? In the more and more ways, the Wisconsin Synod is bringing the gospel to people who are hungry for it, wherever in the world they may be.

Now, you realize, none of that mission work would be possible without the prayers and offerings of people just like you. Whether it's through your support for Mount Olive's Mission Partner in the Philippines, or through your regular gifts to our general fund. I know that this past year there's a lot of emphasis on our Forward in Faith offering, but let's remember all those dollars are kind of staying here at home. It's a portion of our general fund giving which we send to the WELS. Your regular gifts each week are helping to support the training and sending of missionaries around the world. To God be the glory!

But what if you can't financially support those who are bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth? Then you do it yourself, across the backyard fence, or in the office down the hall. Invite your neighbor to come to our Open House next month. Invite your co-worker to bring her kids to our Fall Festival this weekend. Make plans to bring an unchurched friend with you to our Christmas Eve service when our congregation, along with the rest of the Wisconsin Synod, it's hoping to bring 1 million people into contact with the saving message of God's love in Christ Jesus.

When you think about it, that mission of bringing God's salvation to the ends of the Earth, can seem a little overwhelming. Really, to the ends of the Earth? Like to Houghton Michigan and Beyond? But when you realize, who's going with you: Jesus. When realize you've got the greatest message of all time. In Christ, God is for you, not against you." Then you realize God has given you exactly what you need to...Bring His salvation to the ends of the Earth. May God bless the mission he's given to you and me, for the salvation of many souls, one at a time. Amen.