

“ I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

When the rains recently came through North Carolina with Hurricane Florence, people had to be saved from their homes. Boats and helicopters were brought in to lift people to safety, so that they wouldn't drown.

We aren't being sent to save people from water, but from fire. Sometimes we forget what is at stake here. Many people are going to be cast into the eternal fires of hell on that Final Day. It's hard to fathom that. I'd rather not. But God's Word is true. We need to take it seriously. The main goal of hospice care is to make people comfortable as they near death. That is not our goal as Christians, because there are no sedatives in hell. If we just want to make sure people are comfortable here, they will die and go to hell. So God wants us to go on a rescue mission, to save people from being swept up in the fires of God's wrath and hell on Judgment Day. He doesn't want anyone to be damned.

Paul was sent on a mission trip to Antioch. He used the same type of warning when he quoted Habakkuk 1:5.

Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:

“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.’**

The prophet was talking about a Babylonian invasion of Israel, where they would be taken captive for 70 years and the temple would be destroyed. The Babylonian people were very ruthless and evil. So the Israelites thought, “There's NO WAY God would allow THEM to conquer us.” Paul's fellow Jews thought they too were untouchable by God's wrath. God would never damn them. Yet Jesus had already come and gone. Whether they believed it or not, they were going to perish without Christ. He had to warn them. He was sent to Antioch in order to do just that.

But how could they be saved? Paul quoted Isaiah chapter 49. He said to his fellow Jews, **“I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”**A part of saving people involves attracting them to the light, like a moth is attracted to a flame. Only this attraction is not meant to burn, but to save. Jesus is the light of the world. He is the One we are to be attracted to and saved from the darkness. But Jesus also gave His light to the Jews, who were supposed to attract the world to God by their lives and their witness. Paul told that to his fellow Jews in Israel.

Paul took this very personally. These were his fellow Jews he was reaching out to at first. **“My brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.”** The law wasn't able to save anyone. Paul knew this from personal experience. He tried to prove he was saved through keeping the law. It didn't work. Yet little did he know that hidden within the law of Moses there were gospel promises of Jesus and His salvation through the sacrifices and the prophecies. Jesus fulfilled the law. Jesus conquered sin and death. Jesus earned their salvation.

Paul earnestly reached out to his fellow Jews in hopes they would hear the Gospel, repent and believe. **“I want you to know.”** It's interesting how he presents this. It's a fact. You can KNOW it. Your sins are forgiven.

I'm proclaiming it to you. Jesus already died for your sins. God already raised Him from the dead. It's a done deal. It's not about doing something to get right with God. Jesus already did what He needed to do on the cross to get you right with God. Believe it and be saved! Do you have that confidence? Do you share it? Do you say to the people you know, "I want you to know" about Jesus?

But Paul's fellow Jews didn't want anything to do with Jesus. They wanted to take pride in their heritage as Jews. So instead of being a light to attract the Gentiles, they rejected the light. They became black holes. They were only driven by jealousy. So Paul said, "I'm going to bypass you and go to the Gentiles now."

God wants us to be attractive to the world as well. People are watching you. Your co-workers, children, and neighbors see you. There was a man who took a video of some of our children on the playground shoving one another a year or two ago. He put it on Facebook, shaking his head. For better or worse, people are watching. We have a big presence on the south side. If you are a member here, people know where you belong. They see your lifestyle. They see how you present yourself on Facebook and Twitter. Are you a light that would attract people to Jesus by the way you speak to your spouse and raise your children? Or is your life filled with darkness that would be attractive to nobody?

It has always been God's design for all people to be saved, people from every tribe, language, nation and people - to the ends of the earth. In today's text Paul articulates that very thing, as he was speaking to the people in Antioch. Antioch was a Roman colony with enough Jewish residents to support a synagogue. He went there from Perga, which required a trek of about 100 miles through mountainous territory to the east. It was in the middle of Galatia. It wasn't the end of the earth, but it probably felt like it. (It reminds me of where I first started my ministry out in Norton, KS. It was small little town of about 5,000 people in the northeast corner of Kansas. Some might call it the middle of nowhere, on highway 36, a drive through town from east to west. But those people needed to be saved too.) When his fellow Jews rejected the message, he showed them from the Bible that God wanted the Gentiles to know it too.

The "ends of the earth" doesn't have to be a hidden tribe in Africa. It might be a little dark spot next door. You have nice neighbors that you get along well with. But they haven't been to church in years. They don't even know how many books are in the Bible or who the Trinity is. They have no idea who Mary is or Peter or what the incarnation is. They don't know about repentance or forgiveness or baptism or the Lord's Supper. They know the name of Jesus, but they don't know much more than that. There is your "end" to spread the Gospel in.

It is interesting that people refer to this area of Bay City as the "south end." Some might be afraid of the south end. It seems that there are some rougher looking individuals around this part of town lately. There is more diversity. Maybe there is more crime. If that is the case, then these people need the light as well. God wants them to be saved too, in the south end also. We are to be a light shining in a dark place.

This is also why we give mission money so that we can have foreign missions too - like to the Muslims in Pakistan and the Hindus in India and the Buddhists in China. We have missionaries who are willing to go and spread the Gospel.

This Mission and Ministry Sunday is a good time to refocus what we're here for. We lose sight of the big picture in the midst of soccer and softball and football. We get distracted by our house projects and vacations and schooling and work and health. We are here to share the Gospel. People need to be saved. Paul was willing to walk hundreds of miles through mountainous territory. He was willing to risk his life, in order that people might be saved. We still send missionaries overseas in hopes that they will also spread the Gospel to the world. Are you willing to risk a friendship to spread that message? Are you willing to give generously so that missionaries can be sent overseas? I have an elderly neighbor who is starting to have some serious health problems. They know I am a pastor, but I haven't done much to try and tell him about Jesus. I should. His eternity is at stake.

It was wonderful to hear Dr. Jordan's message to us last week in how he zealously reaches out to people from Pakistan, India, and all over the earth. When he had to leave Pakistan to preserve his life and move to Milwaukee, many would have thought that his missionary days are over. That couldn't be farther from the truth. When they came here they stayed in Kalamazoo, and spoke with a Muslim gal at the hotel they were staying with. They shared the Gospel with her. They drove over to the Dearborn area to witness over 200 Muslims being brought into the Lutheran faith in that area as well. We never hear about how many Muslims are being converted to Christianity over here in America, but they are! Dr. Jordan goes to Hindu services and preaches about Jesus. Dr. Jordan's "end of the earth" is wherever the Lord has placed him. Here is a man with a true missionary zeal! Would to God that we had such a zeal.

It's interesting too to see how God's Word can't be contained. More than a decade ago WELS was forced to make drastic cuts in world missions, including cutting the Latin America Traveling Theological Educators—A traveling seminary that was training future pastors all over Latin America. Today millions of Latin Americans connect to Facebook via their smartphones. More than a million Latins connect to Academia Cristo's Facebook page. They come from nearly every country in Central and South America. Some 4,000 are requesting to participate in online classes in order to learn more of what God's Word reveals to us. One of the goals of the Latin America mission team is to identify those who have the ability and the desire to be educated as evangelists and pastors. The ends of the earth are being reached in so many ways we don't even know how.

Sometimes it's amazing to see how things work out. I used to post my sermons on a place called Sermoncentral.com. I stopped doing it years ago. In total I put 310 sermons online. When I checked this week I found out that my sermons have been viewed a total of 1,367,570 times, 691 times in the last seven days. People from India, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, the Philippines, China, Canada and Brazil have looked at them. That is unbelievable to me, seeing I haven't put a sermon on there in years. God works in mysterious ways! I had no idea that my sermons would be so far reaching. But God did.

We honor those who are in the saving business, the medics and the firefighters who go on scene to save lives. You too are a part of the mission. We are on a rescue mission, to keep people drowning in the fires of hell. What an important mission it is. God works in wonderful ways - to the ends of the earth. He works when we don't even realize He is working. He knows where all the corners are, and He wants to use US to tell people about Jesus. How important our foreign missionaries are! Pray for them. Donate for them. Help spread the Gospel in your little corner of the world. Lives are at stake. Eternity is at hand. Amen.