

Matthew 9:35-10:23
Pentecost 2A
June 18, 2017

**This past Wednesday evening I connected my laptop
To the TV in the Youth Center downstairs.
I loaded the Powerpoint slideshow I had prepared earlier
And started clicking through the frames.**

**Around me were rising 7th and 8th graders,
Confirmation students during their summer intensive sessions.
And we were discussing the geography and places
Of the Holy Land – I used photos from our own trip
In 2007 to describe some of the locations.**

**In both preparing the presentation for the youth
And in the actual delivery of it that night,
I was again struck by the feelings I experienced
Standing in some of those places –
Places where scholars or just popular tradition
Hold that notable events occurred.**

**I started joking with the youth that if someone believed
Something important happened in a spot somewhere,
That someone built a church on it.**

**There are so many chapels dotting the landscape,
Now a decade on from that trip I am thankful
That I took a photo of the front door to each place,
A reminder of what holy site followed.**

For as many churches and chapels and shrines as there are though,
We don't really know the exact spot where Jesus was born.
Maybe the stone slab on which his crucified body was laid
Was over there and not right here,
And this may not be the actual well where Jesus spoke
With the Samaritan woman.

But even so, as I stood in those places,
GPS-level precision just didn't seem to matter much.

The whole place, the whole land, was holy.
Being "there" felt like being closer to Christ.
A remarkable experience that I commend to all.

There was one location, though,
Where theology, archaeology, history, and tradition agree,
Where the stories of the generations concur with
Empirical evidence: the Western Wall.

The exposed remains of the great mount of the Jewish Temple.
A huge foundation wall that has been a destination for
The world's major religions for centuries.

Whose stones bear prayers spoken into the minerals and mortar.
Where thousands of folded paper prayers
Are crammed as solemnly as possible
Into any visible crevice.

As I stood as the base of the wall, the immensity of the wall itself
Was immediately overtaken by the immensity
Of what it used to form...God's dwelling place on earth.
The absolute core of Jewish religious life,
The birthplace of formalized worship,

Since the days of the very first tabernacle in the wilderness of Sinai,
It might as well have been the very center of the universe.

There was great solemnity and functionality of the Temple complex.
From the Old to the New Testaments,
Even in its cycles of destruction and rebuilding,
The Temple WAS the symbol of religion,
The symbol of Kingdom, the symbol of God.

The place was so important because:

“The religion of the day was a religion that required the faithful,
If they were faithful, to come to the centers of faith.

“God was in God's house and that was that.
The faithful came to make their offerings
And to support the central religious faith,
Over and against any local or dispersed religiosity.

“One could only be faithful in direct pilgrimage
To the one shrine on the holy mount.

“So here in Matthew and in the other Gospel narratives,
As Jesus sends disciple-makers out into the villages and towns
He undermines a central religious tenant:
Jesus takes faith and spirit and blessing
And the unbinding of burdens
Out into the field where the people are.”

Still though, he warns that that field, that where the people are
Is not a field of dreams easily realized.
That there will be trials and missteps,
And even those who would refuse to listen.

St. Augustine, in a sermon preached on this text, says this:

“Now consider what Jesus is saying here. If but one wolf came among many sheep, be they ever so many thousands, they will all be put to confusion by the one wolf in the midst of them: and though all may not be hurt, yet all are frightened.

“What manner of design is this then, what manner of counsel, what manner of power, not to let in a wolf amongst the sheep, but to send the sheep against the wolves!

“I send you,” Jesus says, “as sheep in the midst of wolves;” not just to the neighborhood of wolves, but “in the midst of wolves.”

**Augustine preached this sermon on a festival day
In honor of the Martyrs, an All Saints Day of sorts,
Where the journey of those gone before us
Model the courage, patience, and suffering
Needed and found on our own.**

**At the heart of today’s reading, is a simple question posed to us:
To what wolfpack has Jesus sent you?
To what burdens has Christ sent the flock
Of Grace Lutheran Church?**

**To what hurting, ailing, broken, angry, hostile,
Hating, bigoted, unjust, insulting, dying places
Is God in Christ calling us to proclaim some Good News?**

**THE Good News that all of those things,
While they may linger for the night,
Do not hold sway when the light comes
Breaking in in the morning.**

The commission of Jesus should be as radical,
And maybe even as offensive to us
As it was the very first time it was uttered.

Because it is easy for us to look around at this place
And wonder why more people
Aren't just showing up at the doors and filling the pews.

We have all these wonderful ministries and programs.
We have beautiful music and faithful learning opportunities.
We have this impressive building that you can't possibly
Miss when driving past it!

The gospel narrative here clearly points to the destination,
Points to the target of our apostleship.

The mission field of God's Kingdom
Is planted and grows out in the wild places,
Places without holy shrines and chapels,
Where the paths are dusty and the sun hot.

Where the lost ones dwell without hope,
Lost because the church throughout the ages
Continues the "come and see", "come and get"
System of exchange.

Where God is only present, where faithfulness and righteousness
Is only bequeathed to the ones who show up
In buildings of stone and wood.

Jesus and his apostles change all this:
The Gospel comes near to you...not you to the Gospel.

**As we continue to press into the summer months
Our routines shift just enough to mark this season
As different from all the rest:**

**Schools are out, vacations are had,
The lingering light in the evenings prompts lingering friends
And family meals out on the porch.**

**So perhaps we might challenge ourselves
To shift our religious routines this summer:
Call that church member you haven't seen in a while.
Go ahead and put Adult Education, and youth events
On your family's calendar for the Fall.
Ponder if God might be calling you
To be a Stephen Minister,
A Sunday Morning Greeter,
A children's Sunday School teacher.**

**Those and all the other things we do here in this place
Equip us to go out and invite someone to join you here.
To share with them what God has done in your life
Through the life of this place.**

**Our apostolic journey of Good News unleashed on the world
And in the streets and people's homes
Is one grounded in the grace of God.**

**Our imitating the ministry of Jesus and his compassion and love
Reveals to the world exactly who it is we follow.
Our actions, our grace, our mercy,
Our healing and releasing
Will reveal God's love to the world.**

**I don't think the gospel author included the names of the apostles
In his narrative for the sake of authenticity or completeness.**

**The list of names is there because we are meant to add our own to it.
Through our baptisms into Christ we are joined
In Christ's mission in the world...**

**And nowhere else is it more clearly spelled out than here:
As you go, proclaim the good news,
"The kingdom of heaven has come near."**

**A kingdom marked by liberation and healing.
A kingdom unbounded by holy sites and places.
A kingdom defined by hope and promise,
A kingdom plenty big enough to share.**

Amen.