

“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. (Acts 13:38-48)

Bring Salvation to the Ends of the Earth

Several years ago, when my kids were still in the school here, we went to a soccer tournament at a school in Ohio. But it wasn't located just off the highway somewhere. It was out in the middle of nowhere. Even our GPS had trouble finding it. Now, that school wasn't at the very end of the earth – but you could see it from there. I'm joking, of course. But that expression “the ends of the earth” occurs almost 50 times in the Bible. What does it mean? Obviously, in one sense, there is no “end” of the earth. The earth is a sphere and if you tried to keep going until you reached the end of it, you would just keep going around and around forever. The phrase in the Bible does not challenge that reality. It's a poetic way of talking about something very far away and remote. The phrase comes up in our sermon text for today because God commanded his people to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. Paul and his mission team had come to a city that was kind of remote – the trip there had been so hard that one of their team had dropped out and gone home. But Paul and the rest of the missionaries came and preached the gospel there. This morning we want to look at what they said there to inspire us to continue their work, because the Lord's marching orders for his church have not changed. God still calls us to **bring salvation to the ends of the earth.**

I.

When God gave the command, he obviously didn't mean that we should skip straight to the farthest away and hardest to reach places. He meant that we should hit every place in between and not stop until the gospel has, indeed, reached the ends of the earth. But when do that, what are we supposed to proclaim? Paul gives us an excellent example of what every missionary – indeed every Christian – should be doing. My friends, **bring salvation to the ends of the earth by proclaiming the forgiveness of sins through Jesus.**

In this hard to reach town in modern Turkey, Paul found a Jewish synagogue. He always went to his own people first for the simple reason that God had made promises to them about a coming Savior and Paul wanted to let them know that those promises had been kept. So on a Saturday, he went to the normal synagogue services. While he was there, he was invited to stand up and share a message of encouragement. Paul launched into an off the cuff sermon about what it meant to be the chosen people of God: Jesus the Savior came to the

world through Israel. But Israel failed to recognize their promised Savior, even though the prophecies about him were read every Sabbath in their synagogues. Their rulers crucified him for no reason but their own jealousy. But that didn't defeat Jesus. In fact, that was part of the plan that those prophecies foretold. After dying, Jesus rose from the dead, again just as the Hebrew prophets had foretold.

Then Paul gets to the point: **“Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.”** That's what his dying and rising means: our sins are paid for. Jesus stood in the place of every man, woman and child who will ever live and he suffered what our sins deserve. Then he rose to say that his payment was enough for you and for me and for all the world. Paul goes on to say that everyone who believes that message is justified. What does that mean? The Greek word is courtroom term. It's what the judge says when he finds a defendant not guilty. Faith in Christ means that God looks at Jesus instead of us. God sees Jesus paying for our sin and guilt and he calls us holy and righteous. That message is for you and me personally.

But why do we need it? Because the natural inclination of the human heart is to think that I can be good. It's up to me to be a good person and get to heaven. You know what? Every other religion in the world agrees with that. They're all about setting up the hoops that we humans have to jump through to get to whatever that religion's idea of heaven is. The three great world religions that compete with Christianity – Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism – all revolve around powerful messages of what their adherents have to do to be saved. They have interesting names like the Five Pillars of Islam or the Eightfold Path of Hinduism, but in the end, they are all about what you have to do to make God or the gods favor you and move you up the ladder.

It's natural for us human beings to think that way. Even we Christians struggle to keep from thinking that I get points with God by coming to church or bringing a big offering. Whether we find the ends of the earth in some exotic country where the landscape is dotted with temples for other gods, or we find it in Detroit and Westland and Garden City and Livonia where you can hardly drive down a street without passing some kind of Christina church, that gospel message challenges all that we human beings want to believe about ourselves. And it's a good thing, too. Because believing we can get to heaven either makes us into self-righteous Pharisees and all the ugliness that implies, or it makes us despair and believe that there is no hope for a sinner like me.

Either way, Jesus is the answer. We cannot keep God's law. It demands perfection. But Jesus was perfect for us. He died and he paid all we owe. At the deepest moment of our despair over our sins, Jesus gently reminds us that we are forgiven. At the most horrible and painful moments of life on this earth, Jesus tells us that he is with us, that he will hear our prayers and rescue us, that he will bring us home to heaven and free us from all that hurts and all that is wrong with life here. That message is what brings salvation to the ends of the earth. It brought salvation to you and me. We heard the voice of our Savior and God taught us to trust his love. Now, God calls us to share that message here and around the world.

II.

The people in the synagogue that day were so intrigued by Paul's words that they asked him to come back the next week and speak again. Almost the whole city turned out that day. People must have been talking about what those visitors had said and they wanted to hear more. But the Jewish leaders were jealous of Paul's success so they attacked him and his message. Paul quoted Isaiah to remind them what God commanded his Old Testament people: **“I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”** Jesus is the one true light that gives light to the world. But he shines through us. My friends, **bring salvation to the ends of the earth by spreading the word of the Lord to the world.**

It was sad that the Jewish people did not want to hear the good news. But Paul knew what to do next: turn to the Gentiles and share the gospel with them. Luke tells us that they rejoiced and **“all who were appointed for eternal life believed.”** God has given us the only tool we need to spread salvation to the ends of the earth: the gospel. The good news that Jesus has won salvation changes hearts. God also tells us something else: he has chosen those who will believe. Before the world began, he made that choice. And we can't screw it up. We can't do such a bad job sharing the gospel that we keep even one of God's chosen ones out of heaven. We can't do such a bad job making people feel welcome that we drive out someone who otherwise would've gone to heaven. If God chose them, he will find them with the gospel and give them faith.

But God does call us to bring that salvation to them, and what a sad comment it is on us if we fail to do our part. There is simply no way for us to know who the chosen ones are. Is it the good people, the respectable people? That would've been the Pharisees in Jesus' world and very few of them came to faith. Would it be

logical to assume that the elect don't include people who openly live sinful lives, people who are an embarrassment, people that we don't want to be examples for our kids? In Jesus' day, that would have been the tax collectors and prostitutes. And yet, again and again, Jesus reaches out exactly to those people and shares the gospel with them. Money, prestige, good health, having something to contribute to the church's work – none of those things guarantees that someone will believe. Jesus calls us to share the gospel with everyone because he died for everyone and God wants all people to be saved.

So we carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. Today, our synod is working around the globe. And our congregational mission offering makes us a part of those efforts in exotic places that most of us will never go, and it makes us a part of the training of pastors and teachers who will carry that message to the ends of the earth and to all the places in between. But today, God is doing a miracle that Paul could never have foreseen: he's bringing the world to us. Today, there are people from every nation under heaven living in our country, coming into contact with the gospel. Many of them are eager to carry the good news back to their home country. Today, all over the world, small groups of Christians are coming to the WELS and asking for help and guidance in God's Word so that they can share the good news in their home countries and cultures.

Last month at our pastors conference, one of the pastors from Lansing brought along a man from Pakistan, a militantly Muslim country. His father was raised Muslim but converted to Christianity. His family kicked him out and treated him like dirt. They tried to turn his children against him and his new faith. But he persisted and his son, after a long struggle with the pressure from the extended family, came to see Jesus as his Savior and began trying to share the gospel in a place where you can literally die for converting people to Christianity. Eventually he married a Christian wife and came here and discovered the WELS. He is studying to become a pastor in hopes of taking the gospel to his people living here in the United States and those back home. That's just one story among countless thousands. Today, God is using the internet to magnify our message in ways we never could before. The Spanish language *Academia Cristo* Facebook page literally makes contact with millions of people. Some 4000 are asking to participate in online classes. God is bringing the world to us.

Our job is to bring the light of Christ to that world. And it's hard. It's expensive. It requires dedicated workers and dedicated lay people. It requires prayer and sacrifice. But all those things are things that God gives us. God has already given us Jesus. He's given us life and love and forgiveness. And he promises that through that message he will give us the faith we need to sacrifice for the cause of the gospel.

Peace Lutheran Church is a part of that work. We share the gospel through our school and preschool, where we often have a quarter to a third of our students coming from outside our congregation. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Every Christian is a light to the world. Every Christian has the opportunity to share in spreading salvation to the ends of the earth. What is your role? Simply talking about your faith. Be able to explain what the gospel means and pray that God would give you the strength to do so when the time arrives. Live a life that says that Jesus has made a difference. People will notice and God will open doors. Pray for the gospel to go out, pray for people you know need to hear it, pray for the words they need to hear.

God hears and answers our prayers, so pray for me and for our teachers that we are lights in the darkness. Pray for our congregation's efforts to reach out. One is coming up on Saturday when we invite our community to come here for our trunk or treat. We will be sharing the gospel. Come and help us with that event and invite people to come back. Another effort will come on Christmas Eve. We'll be sending 3,000 invitations to our neighbors. Pray that they respond. And when you're here on Christmas Eve, welcome those visitors. Show Christian love to every guest who joins us here. And yes, be faithful in bringing an offering that reflects the ways that God has blessed you. Every way that we help makes us partners in spreading salvation to the ends of the earth. All those things come from knowing Jesus' love and the salvation he has brought to us. Be a stopover on the gospel's path to the ends of the earth. Amen.