

## **The Story Continues**

In the past three Sundays we saw the story of redemption reach something of a climax as Jesus offered his own sinless life as the sacrifice to atone for our sins. He died on the cross, was buried, three days later he rose from the dead, then ascended into heaven where he rules and reigns at the right hand of the Father, seated in power and authority. God's plan of providing redemption for the fallen human race has been carried out. The bible says **"God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them."** 2 **Corinthians 5:19**. The offer of forgiveness and redemption is available to everyone, everywhere. You don't have to suffer the wrath of God against you and the sin in your life. God's judgment and wrath has been turned away from everyone who trusts in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus has done all that had to be done to provide salvation. Here is what the Apostle Paul tells us. **"That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.' For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"** **Romans 10:9-13**

Redemption is provided. Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord of your life, surrender the control of your life to Jesus, believe in your heart God raised him from the dead and that he is everything the bible says he is, trust your life to him and you will be saved. That's good news for all that have heard. It was good news for the disciples. They heard, believed and experienced redemption, but what about the rest of us? They were Jews living in Israel. Good for them, but what about the rest of us, the Gentiles living elsewhere? Paul says there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." But if we haven't heard, how can we be saved? That's the very question Paul asks. **"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? ...Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ."** **Romans 10:14-17**

Jesus suffered and died to bring redemption to the whole world. But how can he get that message of salvation and redemption to the world for whom he died? What was his plan? The answer is...us! As frightening and risky and crazy as it sounds, Jesus decided to trust his disciples and all the followers and believers that would come after them to be the means by which the greatest news of all time would be delivered to the whole world! **Jesus decided the story of redemption would rely upon the church!** Talk about taking a risk.

Jesus trusted the disciples with the responsibility of taking his message to the world. Think about that. He hand-picked these 12 guys, one of which turned out to be a traitor. All of them deserted him on the night he was betrayed, although Peter did take a swipe at the ear of a servant of the chief priest, but then, hardly proving his courage, a few minutes later he swore that he didn't even know Jesus. These didn't sound like the kind of guys you could trust to carry your message to the world, but this is who Jesus trusted. These men and a handful of women would be the ragged team upon which he would build his church and he was bold enough to declare that not even the gates of hell would prevail against his church.

Frederick Buechener in his book *Secrets In The Dark* said of the church, "We do well to keep in mind that the idea of becoming the church wasn't their idea. It was Jesus's idea. It was Jesus who made them a church. They didn't come together the way like-minded people come together to make a club. They didn't come together the way a group of men might come together to form a baseball team or the way a group of women might come together to lobby for higher teacher's salaries. They came together because Jesus called them to come together. That is what the Greek word *ekklesia* means, from which we get our word 'church.' It means those who have been called out."

Jesus called these men and women out to be the church and then he sent them out into the world to be the church. Before he ascended into heaven, he gave them clear direction as to what they were to do in what we call the great commission. **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."** **Matthew 28:18-20**

He gave them a promise to be with them, wherever they went, to the very end of the age. In addition, He promised to equip and empower them. In Acts 1 he told them to stay in

Jerusalem until they were baptized with the Holy Spirit. He said at that time, **“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8**

Get this. God reconciled the world to himself through Jesus Christ. Redemption has been secured for the whole world, for everyone who will call upon the Lord. It's the most important news in the history of the world and at that time the only people who knew it numbered a few hundred followers of Jesus. 120 of them gather in an upper room in Jerusalem, praying and waiting for what Jesus referred to as “the gift my Father promised” the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The day of Pentecost was the last day when everyone who knew and had experienced God's redemption could fit in one place.

On the day of Pentecost a sound came from heaven like a mighty wind and it filled the whole house where they had gathered. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter stood up along with these other followers of Christ and began to preach this message, that Jesus was the Son of God, Messiah and Lord. He was crucified, resurrected and ascended into heaven where he now is seated at the right hand of God the Father in power. He told them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and about 3,000 were added to their number that day. A few days later the number grew to 5,000 with more people being saved every day.

The disciples, the first followers of Christ, flawed yet redeemed by his grace, at times confused, yet called and converted, weak but now empowered by the Holy Spirit, boldly they shared the story of redemption. Jesus said he would build his church and these were the first building blocks he used. Quoting Frederick Buechner again, he writes, “Jesus made his church out of human beings with more or less the same mixture in them of cowardice and guts, of intelligence and stupidity, of selfishness and generosity, of openness of heart and sheer cussedness as you would be apt to find in any of us. The reason he made his church out of human beings is that human beings were all there was to make it out of. In fact, as far as I know, human beings are all there is to make it out of still. It's a point worth remembering.”

Jesus had only human beings to work with and so, here we are. All who have been saved and redeemed by his grace have been called out and commissioned to go into the whole world, into every person's world, and proclaim the greatest news that has ever been told. We are sent as

witnesses of Jesus and ambassadors and agents of redemption. **The only hope for the whole world is the gospel of Jesus Christ and the only hope of getting that message to the world rests with the church of Jesus Christ and that's us!**

Jesus said we would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. With the same anointing and power of the Holy Spirit as the disciples at Pentecost, we are to take his message and continue to say what he was saying and do as he was doing. The first chapter of Acts begins with a reference to "all that Jesus began to do and to teach". It implies that Jesus' ministry didn't come to an end at his ascension but instead it was only the beginning. Jesus' ministry and message continues on through us, his church. We are to continue to do all he began to do and teach. Jesus said he had come to **"...preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."** Luke 4:18-19. That's what we are to continue to do. The world should see the redemptive ministry of Jesus in us. We are to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and visit those in prison. We are to preach the gospel to the whole world and make disciples in every nation. We are to be salt and light in a decaying and darkening world. We are supposed to let our light shine, to let the world see our good works so they will believe and glorify God in heaven. We are supposed to heal the sick and cast out demons and speak life to the dead. We are to be Jesus in this world. How are we doing at being the church?

James said, **"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."** James 1:27. We are to care for orphans and widows. We are to care for and speak for the vulnerable and powerless, for those without a voice. This is the story and work of redemption. How are we doing at being the church?

Paul said of the church at Corinth, **"And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."** 2 Corinthians 3:3.

We are the story of redemption written as a living letter from Christ to the world. As the church, I'm concerned about what our letter says at times. I can't say I've been too proud of what parts of the Evangelical church has said and done at times during this election season. In the name of Jesus we've vilified and demonized people instead of speaking the truth in civility and love. I'm saddened by the hatred that's been shown by Christians towards other Christians

that disagreed over policies and positions. What are we showing to the world? What are we showing to our children and to the church in other parts of the world? Let's ask ourselves, In defense of Christian values in America have we stopped acting like Christians? The election is important, but God forgive us if winning an election becomes more important than winning a lost world to Jesus. Our life, our testimony, is a letter from Christ to the world. Let me ask: What does your letter say? Are you sharing the good news of redemption, that God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son? Remember, the church is the only hope this world has. The message of the gospel they hear from you, from us, that is the only message of redemption they are going to hear. What are we saying?

The bible says, **“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” 2 Corinthians 5:19-20**

It seems crazy, but God is making his appeal through us. The story of redemption rests in us. As flawed and messed up as we are, the story of redemption is us! We have to tell the story. Someone you know is counting on you to tell them the story. That's the way Jesus chose to get redemption's story to the world. He chose us to go into our world and live like Jesus. Show them Jesus. The lost, the dying, the broken and hopeless, the business man in his office, the homeless woman on the street, the widow, the orphan, successful or struggling, next door or on the other side of the world, their only hope is that one of us, one of Christ's ambassadors, will reach them with the message of redemption. God is making his appeal through us, his church.

God help us. The story of redemption is only one generation away from being lost to the world. We are his church, the only means on the planet by which people can discover they don't have to die and go to hell! What a responsibility. What a calling he has placed on us. God is counting on us and the world is counting on us to bring the story of redemption, by every means possible, in every way possible, to every person possible, before it's too late. **The story is redemption, the stakes are eternal, time is running out and Jesus is counting on us!** Keep your eyes on Jesus and let's take his story of redemption to our world!