

Before we dig into today's Gospel reading, I want to back up to what we read last week – what comes just before this passage. Last week I focused on a different part of the Gospel and Paul's letter to the Galatians, so even if you were here, you may not have caught what Jesus said to James and John – the sons of Thunder. Luke writes in chapter 9,

“<sup>51</sup> When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. <sup>52</sup> And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to prepare for his arrival, <sup>53</sup> but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem. <sup>54</sup> When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” <sup>55</sup> But [Jesus] turned and rebuked them.”

And then Jesus went on to talk about what it would be like to follow him.

But that wasn't the first time Jesus had sent “messengers ahead of him.” Earlier in Chapter 9, Jesus had sent out the disciples in a very similar way to what we hear this morning. “Take nothing for your journey: no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. <sup>4</sup> Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. <sup>5</sup> Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

Sounds familiar. Again, in today's reading, Jesus sends 72 messengers to go ahead of him to every town and place. They are to go into homes to heal and proclaim, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” They are sent out, to the places that Jesus would go, with a message of peace and healing. They are sent out on a mission from God to bring wholeness.

Think about that in contrast to what James and John had asked. When messengers weren't received – and the reason doesn't really matter – when the messengers who were preparing for Jesus' arrival were refused, James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven and burn them out of existence. The message that James and John are proclaiming is pretty clear... “Receive us, or else. Our way or the highway. Turn or burn.”

And Jesus says no. That's not the way of the kingdom. That's not the message of the gospel. That's not the way to follow.

It's no secret that us Lutherans have a hard time with that very dangerous word, “evangelism.” It's right there in the name of our denomination, the **Evangelical** Lutheran

Church in America, but we do a great job of **not** talking about our faith. It's a bit of a cliché, but I'll share the joke anyway, what do you get when you cross and Jehovah's Witness with a Lutheran? Someone who knocks on your door and doesn't say anything.

It's not that we aren't friendly. It's not that we don't like people...mostly. It's not that we don't believe what God has done and is doing, we just get stuck. We're afraid. And to be honest, sometimes we're just a little bit too much like James and John, the fire bringers...too eager to call on the vengeance of God and too slow to find grace for our neighbors.

To be fair, Lutherans have always been particularly good about living an **active** faith, doing what God asks of us in response to the gospel. For generations, we've made an impact on the world because of our faith. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, now known as Global Refuge, has met the needs of migrants for decades. Lutheran World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Relief are well known for the care they provide in times of need. But we're not so good at **talking** about what we're doing.

On a micro level, over and over again, we have proven our inability to talk our way into connecting with new people. When it isn't working, we either close in on ourselves, or turn to the scorched earth strategy of James and John.

Think about these questions for a moment. What is the purpose of evangelism? What are we trying to do when we reach out to others? What are we trying to accomplish?

Whatever answer you came up with, fit it into the framework of the difference between James' and John's violence and the message of "Peace! The kingdom of God has come near." Earlier examples notwithstanding, much of what we, the institutional church, have tried to do throughout history is more about predatory colonization than it has been about healing and peace. Much of what the church has called evangelism has looked more like James' and John's "turn or burn" mentality...and we've often provided the fire.

We can go back to the Doctrine of Discovery – which came in 1493 and was used to conquer the world in the name of Christ – as one example. An unspeakable amount of violence was done "in the name of Christ". But we can also look at the very real harm that continues to be done by missionaries who go into communities to irreparably change them to a foreign vision of the "right way" to be Christian and faithful. It might not include a literal sword today, but in some ways, it hasn't changed all that much.

And we have to be honest about our own efforts to spread the gospel and proclaim God's kingdom in this time and place. If the purpose of our evangelism is to make people

just like us, get them to sit in our pews 52 weeks of the year, and put 10% of their resources into our offering plate...then we aren't **really** that far away from James and John either.

I'm not suggesting the mission of the 72 is identical to the mission of the church today, but we certainly can learn something from how they were sent. The purpose of their "going" was to proclaim the kingdom of God coming near. Whether it was received or not, whether it was met with peace or not.

It's far too easy to get stuck in the first half of verse 11, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you." And forget the second half, "Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near."

That's not to say that we don't continue to seek others to join us in the work we do together, but what might it look like if we really think about learning from those we encounter and offering them peace and healing rather than telling them who they should be or what they should do with their lives?

We're getting ready to reopen the preschool with a mission statement that includes being a "nurturing, faith based early learning environment where every child is valued, supported, and inspired to grow in heart, mind, and spirit." That child is still valued even if they never join us for worship. That seed has been planted if we have proclaimed God's kingdom and peace to that family in a way that has been filled with love and grace. What might it look like to live that out as a congregation?

What might it look like if we not only offer food to those who are hungry once a month, but that we also learn their stories and offer them a bit of the hope we hold onto?

What else does the community outside these walls need to hear and know about the God we worship and follow?

The days of the predatory church as the center of our culture are thankfully over. The time of missional outreach that proclaims God's peace and God's kingdom is here. So, shake that dust off your shoes and get ready. The world needs us. Amen.