

# “Why We Evangelize”

Matthew 28: 16-20

Mission Sunday in Epiphanytide, Boise, 2021

We are taking the option on this 5th Sunday in Epiphanytide of observing it as “Mission Sunday.” The readings all speak of “nations,” but the primary mission of a congregation is a local one, and that will be especially true for us when we move into our new facility this spring. A new building says to the community, “Come here; try this church.” Much of what we are doing now is in preparation of the moment when we will need to introduce ourselves and our program to a lot more inquirers.

But let us now ask on this Sunday dedicated to the subject, Why do we even want to reach more people and have some of them join us? Why evangelize, or spread the Gospel of Christ? Most of you no doubt will answer, “so that more people will believe and be saved.” Well, in this sermon I preach today, I intend to prove to you that that answer is inadequate. It is inadequate because unless we answer another question first, our understanding of the Gospel, the thing we spread when we evangelize, will be distorted, and we won’t know really what we are about.

Hearing and accepting the Gospel is certainly how people are saved, but what is salvation for? To escape Hell and gain Heaven? That brings us closer to the target, but we are still not quite there. To determine what salvation is for, we need to know what life itself is for. To answer why Heaven should be important to us, we need to know why we should expect life’s purpose to be fulfilled in Heaven. In the NT, only the final book, The Revelation of St John, gives us actual scenes of Heaven, to let us know what people are doing there.

A great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, . . . clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, [stand] before the Throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple [Rev 7: 9, 13a].

That and an earlier scene of angels and saints before God's Throne, with "the Lamb in the midst of it," show us our end, the purpose for which we were made: to give God glory. The Creator made us for Himself; hence, our natural orientation is to Him. We have been thrown off course by the disorienting effects of sin. Salvation is the process of restoring a right orientation to our lives, so that we can move again as a created species in the right direction, which is toward God. We reach Him in worship; for in it God makes Himself present to us and we to God. Heaven will not be all worship, if by worship you mean liturgy. But it is in the liturgy that we acknowledge what human life is for and get our attention off ourselves. The challenge, of course, is to maintain that awareness of God when we leave the temple to serve Him in other ways throughout the week.

So to summarize the argument thus far, evangelism, or spreading the Gospel of Christ, is for the salvation of men and women everywhere; and salvation, in turn, is for the purpose of bringing them to the worship of God, in which the human being acts upon his or her natural orientation, and is thus satisfied. In serving God with one's lips in the temple and otherwise outside of it, the creature fulfills the law of his or her being, expressing the truth that God made him or her for Himself to enjoy and be enjoyed by in an eternal Friendship, a union of Creator and the creature made in His own image and likeness. Since evangelism is a means to salvation, and salvation a means to worship, it makes no sense at all to make our liturgy evangelically oriented — that is, to use worship as a means for getting the message across and saving souls. That is getting things backwards. Hence, in a mainstream church, which is to say one of the Catholic type, the Sunday service never ends with preaching. The Gospel, the Good News of salvation, the evangelical part of the service, because it is the means, leads into the main act of worship, which is

the Eucharist. The sermon must have a place of secondary importance, and strictly speaking, isn't even necessary; for it is merely commentary on the Word that was read earlier, which itself is a means. Another corollary of the argument is that it does no good at all to do evangelism, and get someone saved by the hearing and acceptance of the Good News, if it does not lead to worship. If someone claims to be saved yet does not gather with God's people for worship, the question we should put to him or her is, saved for what?

Do you doubt my logic? Have I made too much of our reading today from The Revelation of St John, the scene there of angels and saints worshipping before God's Throne? Well, then, let us look at our other readings, from the OT. The story of Israel begins with the call of Abraham. God tells him to go to a land He will show Him, and He also makes some promises. Abraham is one man, and his descendants the Israelites will form one nation. But already the universal scope of the mission God will perform by him is evident in the final promise that in him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" [Gen 12: 3b]. If we keep reading in Genesis, we discover that, when Abraham and his party enter Canaan, God appears to him at Shechem, and Abraham builds an altar to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving. "From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent . . . . And there he built [another altar] to the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD" [v. 8]. In other words, after Abraham answered the call and made the journey, when he had come to his new home, he worshipped. He showed the purpose of the mission by building altars and calling upon the Name Yahweh to proclaim His sovereignty over himself, the land, and all the other inhabitants. The nations would later, through the Gospel, be brought to the worship of Him and thus receive the promised blessing on "all the families of the earth." The Psalm we chanted today gives voice to that ultimate fulfillment of that promise to Abraham: "All nations that you have made

shall come and worship You, O Lord, and shall glorify Your Name” [Ps 86: 9]. Throughout the Psalter, we see its authors calling not just Israel to worship, but the other nations too; for that indeed was the mission of the Chosen People, to bring all to the worship of the one true God, who made heaven and earth.

And I will add to those OT texts a passage from the New Testament. St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans gives us the most elaborate and systematic exposition of the Gospel and how one who hears and accepts it is saved. But many who study it pay little attention to the conclusion in chapter 15. What was the point of the Messiah’s mission, and what is the point of telling others about it? Paul tells us in verse 8:

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised [that is, the Jews] to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy.

Then the Apostle quotes a string of statements in the OT to back that up. He quotes a hymn written by David: “Therefore I will praise You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your Name” [v. 9]. The word “Gentiles,” by the way, is simply the Latin word for nations. It comes from the Vulgate.

And Paul quotes Moses in Deuteronomy: “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with [God’s] people” [v. 10]. And also Psalm 117, the shortest one: “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let the peoples extol Him” [v. 11]. That is “peoples,” plural. And then he finishes with a quotation from Isaiah:

The root of Jesse [that is, the Messiah] will come,  
even He who arises to rule the Gentiles;  
in Him will the Gentiles hope [v. 12].

God chose Israel, so that He would have a people to worship Him after the rest of mankind had fallen into idolatry. And He chose one of them, a particular Jew, David’s royal Heir, to make that worship available to the other nations by His Sacrifice of Himself, which inaugurated the New Covenant. The Gospel of Christ is, in the final analysis, a call to worship Yahweh and leave one’s idols behind. Faith in the Mediator is the means to answering that call. We sinners approach

the Consuming Fire only through Him and the blood that He shed.

The Great Commission is to “make disciples of the nations.” At the level of the local congregation, we do that one person at a time. Why are we building a new church? Not just to have a place from which to do evangelism, but also one in which the Gospel will have its purpose fulfilled. By making the worship of the Creator available to our neighbors, we hold out the possibility to them of finding their true end in life, of getting their attention off themselves and finding their natural orientation to the One who can satisfy. We make life for them meaningful and worthwhile. Worship is not itself evangelism, but without it evangelism cannot be effective, because not having the proper end it is confused. But with a right understanding of means and end, we can, by grace, accomplish this mission that God has given us to perform.

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