

Sermon Notes for 4/17/16 (Easter 4, Good Shepherd Sunday)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Acts 20:17-35

Theme: WHAT WE LEARN FROM PAUL'S AIM

The Point: As it was Paul's goal "to testify to the good news of God's grace," so this is to be the goal of each disciple as well, also in our generation.

Introduction: What are you here for? That is a vital question. And I am not just talking about why you are here in this building at this moment, though that may be reflected in the bigger question also. But what are you here for, in the sense of the purpose and direction of your life? The answer matters, and God's Word affirms that for us.

A story is told involving Yogi Berra, the well-known catcher for the New York Yankees, and Hank Aaron, who at that time was the amazing, chief power hitter for the Milwaukee Braves. The teams were playing in the World Series, and as usual Yogi was keeping up his ceaseless chatter, intended to pep up his teammates on the one hand, and sidetrack the Milwaukee batters on the other. As Aaron came to the plate, Yogi tried to distract him by saying, "Henry, you're holding the bat wrong. You're supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark." Aaron didn't say anything, but when the next pitch came he hit it into the left-field bleachers. After rounding the bases and tagging home plate, Aaron looked at Yogi and said, "I didn't come up here to read." No sir, he had not come to read (or to be distracted listening to a catcher). He came to hit – and hit he did, with a passion.

So what are you here for? If it is not to read or to hit, why are you here? Paul spoke the words that are our text for today to the elders of Ephesus, a group of church leaders with whom he had worked and labored for some three years (longer than he stayed in any other city). He is parting from them, presumably for the last time (he even said it directly: "None of you. . . will ever see my face again."). His farewell is filled with poignancy, but also with some distinctive reminders of his goal for ministry in Ephesus and elsewhere. What did Paul think he was there for? Why was he where he was? What was his aim?

Paul says he was there for this purpose: to declare to the church the will and purpose of God, namely His desire to save the world. "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." Some parts of that proclamation would have been sweetness and light. Some parts of it would have hit some raw nerves. It didn't matter to Paul. He says that he has "testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus." Repentance and faith both needed to be proclaimed. Jesus Himself had emphasized the same thing. On Easter evening, meeting with the apostles in the upper room, He had said, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

Repentance must be proclaimed, for people need to realize their desperate need, if they are to appreciate the greatness of God's grace. If you think that you are a pretty good person, someone that God would be glad to have on His side, if you imagine that your wrongdoing is barely a trifle compared to the carryings-on of that jerk down the street, then you have missed the point. God's Word calls each of us to repent, and for good reason. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. If we think we can blame others for our anger, our resentment, our bitterness, our guilt, then we need to take a good look again. No matter how other people may judge you, no matter how decent a person they may imagine that you are, no matter how you may have pulled the wool over their eyes, God's Law declares you guilty and in need of His mercy. Yes, you personally have been weighed in God's balance and found wanting.

And when a person feels the weight of her or his sin lying heavily on the shoulders, then the Spirit can lead that person to seek eagerly the grace of the Savior. The woman at the Samaritan well realized how empty her life was. She came to recognize that no matter where she worshipped, no matter who the man of the week was in her life, no matter how she tried to isolate herself from the accusations of the townsfolk, her life was without ultimate purpose or meaning. And that realization made her thirst for the living water that Jesus had come to offer her. It made no difference to Paul on which side of town a person had grown up or what her social status was or who her parents were or how he had lived his life up to that point.

If you were a living, breathing human being, Paul was determined to speak to you of that person who had become the center of his life, and the center of the life of the universe, the risen Savior Jesus the Messiah. This was so because Paul knew that Jesus was the only way to the heart of the heavenly Father. Jesus' own words speak to this: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." Sheep know the Shepherd's voice. So Christ's own know Him, recognize His voice, and follow Him wherever He leads.

Paul was this sort of determined follower. Keeping God's grace forefront enabled Paul to endure almost unspeakable difficulty and tragedy as he went about his task. Because he was confident of his aim and purpose in life, trials and troubles did not distract him from that purpose, that high and holy calling. He had already gone through beatings (5 times with the lash, 3 with rods), stoning, imprisonments, shipwrecks, and satanic attacks of various sorts. He wrote the Corinthians about being "in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked."

And he tells them on this occasion, "The Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me." What has been the Spirit's testimony to you? It may not be all sweetness and light, but it is moving God's purposes forward, even through your difficulties and griefs. Not long after he got back to Jerusalem, Paul would be arrested and eventually shipped to Rome for trial. What kept Paul going was that he lived on the truth of the Gospel. He did not bank his life on living outside prison walls or outside the hateful actions of his fellows. He did not count on earthly security and safety. He banked his life on knowing and serving Jesus as Lord. This truth of God's grace was not just for his churches or his audiences. It was true for Paul as well, and that gave him power and energy to serve in trials. In spite of these trials, Jesus had given His life for Paul, and Paul lived with the hope of life that would never end, no matter how his earthly journey came to a close.

Paul knew the truth that was embodied in John's Revelation, even before John had seen the vision or written it down. John heard these words from the elder before God's throne as he had asked about the huge throng clothed in white robes: "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." All pain and hurt and emptiness and need will be gone in that day, and we will know the joy of having the Lord wipe away every tear from our eyes. But we still walk on this solid earth for a little while, and in that interim God's spokespeople proclaim His truth to those around them.

Even when Paul had to proclaim the Law of God, it was so that the Gospel could be heard more clearly. His warnings about false teachers who would follow him are spoken with just this purpose in mind. And his predictions would not take long to be fulfilled: "Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the

blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them.” The Church would suffer attacks from within and from outside. What they would need, not just to survive, but to thrive as Christ’s disciples, would be the constant contact with the Good News of God’s grace. They would need to keep in the forefront of their confession, their testimony, and their preaching this reality: that God’s own Son had purchased the Church at the price of His own blood.

No other news can transform hearts and lives like the news of the willing, intentional, bloody sacrifice of Jesus for us. He has endured suffering and torment the likes of which we cannot even imagine. And yet He was the only person ever who did not deserve one iota of that suffering and dying. Because He has given His life for you, you are now set apart as God’s children to live for Him now and forever.

Paul finally called these Ephesian elders to alert and intentional service to the weak and needy as a natural result of the work of the Gospel in their hearts. The Gospel does not just create an island of isolation for the people of God. No, the Gospel drives us to see the needs of others clearly, in the light of God’s love for them, His limitless and boundless love and mercy for each person from every tribe and language and nation and tongue. Here Paul’s words ring true for each of us: “You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

God has given us the ability to labor and to earn a living, not just to keep us safe, but so that we may be able to “support the weak.” I praise God that we have many opportunities to do just that here in this community of faith. Whether it is hosting rummage sales for Central Lutheran School or giving food and money to help new immigrants become acclimated to living in our land or visiting the infirm and elderly or ministering peace between family members and neighbors, you as the people of God are learning every day what it means to support the weak. And I pray that our Lord will multiply those opportunities among us, to His honor and praise!

Conclusion: It started like so many evenings. Mom and Dad at home and Jimmy playing after dinner. Mom and Dad were absorbed with jobs and did not notice the time. It was a full moon and some light seeped through the windows. Then Mom glanced at the clock. “Jimmy, it’s time to go to bed. Go up now and I’ll come and settle you in later.” Unlike usual, Jimmy went straight upstairs to his room. An hour or so later, his mother came up to check if all was well and, to her astonishment, found that her son was staring quietly out of his window at the moonlit scenery. “What are you doing, Jimmy?” “I’m looking at the moon, Mommy.” “Well, it’s time to go to bed now.” As one reluctant boy settled down, he said, “Mommy, you know, one day I’m going to walk on the moon.”

Who could have known that the boy in whom the dream was planted that night would bring to fruition this dream 32 years later when James Irwin stepped on the moon’s surface, one of just 12 representatives of the human race to have done so? Not only that, but he had this to say about his experience: “Before I entered space with the Apollo 15 mission in July of 1971, I was...[a] silent Christian, but I feel the Lord sent me to the moon so I could return to the earth and share his Son, Jesus Christ.” Jim Irwin became a faithful proclaimer of the Gospel and testified eloquently to the Triune God as Creator and Redeemer. He said it was more important that Jesus walked on this earth than that man walked on the moon. So why are you here? As it was Paul’s goal “to testify to the good news of God’s grace,” so this is to be the goal of each disciple as well, also in our generation. You may not go to the moon, as did Jim Irwin, but you are heading on the trip of a lifetime, one which will wind up before the throne of grace itself, one which we would desire to share with those who live and work around us. May the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ strengthen your heart and open your lips with a full declaration of Christ’s lordship to all! AMEN!