

Bring Salvation to the Ends of the Earth!

A sermon based on Acts 13:38-48.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “the ends of the earth”? I’m guessing you don’t buy into that “the earth is flat” idea. I mean, that whole theory was challenged by Greek philosophers already in the 6th century BC and was debunked when Magellan circumnavigated the world in the 1500’s. So, the earth is spherical, and there are no official ends, right?

But of course, I know that’s not what you’re thinking about. When you hear “the ends of the earth,” what comes to mind is probably a place that’s far away or remote. Like the Middle East, Africa, Antarctica. I’ll bet there are some people in the Lower 48 who would look at you wide-eye when you tell them you live in Alaska...”but that’s so far away. It’s like the end of the earth.”

Well, go back to 1st century AD. I have a map of the known world during the time of the early New Testament Church...after Jesus’ ascension and during the apostle Paul’s missionary journeys. It’s primarily the area around the Mediterranean Sea. Now, Antioch of Pisidia, where Paul was in our 2nd Lesson for this morning, was not “the end of the earth” to people living in Galatia, near the center of what today is the country of Turkey. It wasn’t even to the people living in Israel, although, to be fair, a trip of 500+ miles back then wasn’t as simple as jump in the car and a couple of days driving and you’re there. It was still some distance.

You know what was the “ends of the earth” for the early Christians at that time? Spain, a place Paul was determined to reach with the gospel of Christ...a place we don’t know for sure if he did ever personally make it there....as far as we’re told, he made it to Rome, and that’s it.

The “ends of the earth.” Again, what is it to you? You know, before Jesus ascended into heaven, he commissioned the disciples – and us – when he said, ***“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*** That commission is reflected in the mission of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, which, according to its mission statement, ***“exists to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity.”*** That’s our mission, too. Today, Mission and Ministry Sunday, is a time to refocus ourselves on the mission Jesus has given us. Do you know what it is? In the words of the prophet Isaiah, quoted by St. Paul, our mission is to **Bring Salvation to the Ends of the Earth**. Again, our mission is to bring salvation to the ends of the earth 1) by proclaiming the only message worth hearing – forgiveness of sins through Jesus, and 2) by speaking the word of the Lord to the world!

So, our verses from Acts this morning plop us down in the pew right as Paul was finishing one of his sermons. Again, he was in Pisidian Antioch, in the midst of his 1st missionary journey, where he had been sent by God to bring the good news of salvation to those who hadn’t heard it yet.

And, if you were to read the rest of chapter 13 before our verses, you’d understand the way Paul did that. Briefly, he go to a city, go to the synagogue, where the Jews would typically meet, and he’d share the message of Christ crucified with Jews and Gentiles alike, and then he’d watch the Holy Spirit at work, turning many of those people into followers of Jesus...Christians.

It wasn't exactly rocket science. He took the people through the simple story of salvation – God's love to his people from the Old Testament on, but their rebellion against him, and God's loving response in Jesus, who was perfect, who was executed on the cross, whom God raised from the dead. Paul wasn't the world's most eloquent preacher.

But he was personal. Listen to how he starts out our verses, ***“Therefore, I want you (sitting in front of me) to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you (who are gathered who today).”*** Not, Jesus came to save people in general. No, this Jesus is your personal Savior. It didn't matter whether they were Jews or Gentiles, that message was for every single one of them.

It's a basic message, but one that needs to be shared. Do you know why?

Well, let's start with a simple question. What does it take to get into heaven? *Faith in Jesus (as our Savior from sin)*. Right. So, then, what percentage do our own deeds play into that equation? In other words, what part of our eternity can we earn on our own? *None, zero percent*. Correct! God's Word says, ***“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.”***

How many religions actually teach that...forgiveness and salvation through Jesus alone?

You know three of the largest religions in the world, outside of Christianity? *Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam*. And what do they teach? Islam with its Five Pillars, Buddhism with its Eightfold Path, and Hinduism with its hundreds of millions of gods and tens of millions of reincarnations are all religions that teach people to depend on themselves and their own works for salvation. Many other world religions follow suit.

Well, we still have Christianity, right? Have you been to some of these “Christian” churches or talked to some of their members before? The Roman Catholic church with requirements to do acts of penance or a certain number of Hail Mary's or praying to the saints and other meritorious works – all righteous acts that are being stored up to cut down your time in purgatory and get you closer to eternity. Non-denominational churches and contemporaries with their believer's prayer – pray Jesus into your heart, choose to become a believer...you do that; that's your greatest work. Mormonism, that on your own, you can become your own god.

How many Christians (in name only) and Christian churches (in name only) are teaching a reliance on our own works rather than looking to Jesus for the forgiveness of sins through him alone? Unfortunately, probably more than you'd think.

The basic message of grace alone through Jesus and faith in Jesus alone saves, and too many are missing it...to their own eternal destruction.

Friends, only through Jesus do we have the complete certainty that we have been set free from sin...justified...declared not guilty of sin. Listen again to what Paul said, ***“Through [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.”***

You know that truth. Only, I repeat, only through Jesus – his life, his death, his resurrection – can we and do we have true salvation.

That's a message, we thank God today, that isn't reserved for us alone, but it's also reaching “to the ends of the earth.” Listen to what one of our missionaries, Pastor John Roebke, reports on what he's

seen among the people of Malawi, **“When they see water splashed on their child’s head, or the head of an adult, they understand that Baptism saves souls by washing away sin’s stain and covering them with the pureness of Christ. When they see people swallowing wheat wafers and sips of wine, they understand that Communion is uniting them with the body and blood Christ used to pay for their freedom. When they see the pastor standing in front and hear him say, “I forgive you all your sins in name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” they understand that it is Christ who is speaking to them, the same Christ whose words give eternal life.”**

Again, we thank God for those opportunities for the gospel to be preached and to reach to the far corners of the world...to those who haven’t heard that good news of peace through Jesus. We frequently get to hear about those gospel successes throughout the world when we watch the WELS Connection...the work God has blessed us as a synod to be able to walk together to accomplish.

That’s what Paul was getting at the following week when he was invited – literally, ‘begged’ - to speak at the synagogue again...this time a full house. There, he quoted Isaiah and said, ***“I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”***

It’s a privileged for us, again, as a synod to be in the position to carry this sweet message to the ends of the earth, and especially as we’re making advances in communication (cell phones and internet) and as people from around the world are coming to us, the U.S.

For example, more than a decade ago WELS was forced to make drastic cuts in world missions, including cutting LATTE (Latin America Traveling Theological Educators—a traveling seminary who was training future pastors all over Latin America). Today millions of Latin Americans connect to Facebook via their smartphones. More than a million Latins connect to Academia Cristo’s Facebook page. They come from nearly every country in Central and South America. Some 4,000 are requesting to participate in online classes in order to learn more of what God’s Word reveals to us. And now we get the blessing of identifying those who have the ability and the desire to be educated as evangelists and pastors.

Or, the Joint Mission Council of the WELS is supporting outreach efforts to Hmong, Hispanic, South Asian, Sudanese, Liberian, Vietnamese, and Chinese people living in the U.S. In many cases, these immigrants want to share the gospel hope they now possess with relatives and friends in the countries from which they emigrated.

But what about you...you personally? The reality is, not everyone can personally carry the good news of forgiveness to the ends of the earth. Not everyone can teach a Bible study in Nepal, instruct a seminary student in Russia, teach in a school on the Apache reservation in Peridot, Arizona.

Don’t forget “to the ends of the earth” includes everything between where we are now and the ends of the earth: over your back fence, the “doubting cynic” in the next cubicle at work, that Sunday school class which still needs a teacher, the family who just moved in down the street from you, supporting our congregation’s evangelism team even more, and making new efforts to reach the unchurched in our own community. We don’t need to go on an international mission trip to reach the ends of the earth; there are people in our community here who need to hear the simple, true message of salvation through Jesus alone.

And you’re equipped – or at least you have the means to be equipped. Here, Bible class, being in your Bible, being reminded of the all-important message of the gospel. And even when you find yourself in

situations where you want to talk about Jesus but aren't completely sure what to say, or maybe you started to, and they asked you a Bible question that you don't know the answer to, you have one of the greatest evangelism tools...either saying, "Come and hear at my church." Or, "I'm not sure about that. Good question. Let me find the answer and then we can talk about it again." That opens another opportunity to talk about Jesus.

And going beyond that, your prayers and offerings are vital. Prayers enlist God's power in carrying out the commission he's given us; offerings enable others to go in our name.

And finally, we praise God when, as Acts says, ***"all who [are] appointed for eternal life [believe]."***

At first glance, the command the Lord has given us, to bring salvation to the ends of earth, seems staggering, impossible even. However, a quick glance at our synod website or reading Forward in Christ or watching WELS Connection...it all reveals that God is already enabling us to go to the ends of the earth. The God who made his Son a light for the Gentiles has called us to bring the light of his salvation to the ends of the earth. With the gospel of forgiveness and the power of his Spirit, he's equipped us to do just that. So, let's do that! Amen.