

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

*“Come over to Macedonia and help us.”*

- Acts 16:9

What good is good news if there is no one to proclaim it? What good is the cross if no one is sent to tell about it? What good is it for us, if no proclaims it to us?

The answer, I suppose, is obvious. It isn't any good at all. Which is why the Lord has called you. You of all people, have been called and charged with proclaiming the good news of the cross to sinners who are desperately in need of hearing good news.

Yes, you, and the rest of this motley crew sitting around you, along with countless others, in every time and place have been called and sent to proclaim Christ and Him crucified for sinners. And it's okay to admit that we are indeed a motley bunch: too young, too old, bald and balding, our waists don't match what our height should be, and vice versa. We're near-sighted and far-sighted. We love pie more than exercise (or at least I do). We are not what the advertisers on Madison Avenue would have suggested.

No, but we are the ones God has chosen and sent. Just as God uses the foolishness of the cross to redeem the world, He uses the likes of us to bring the Gospel. And that is what He has been doing from the beginning. Look at Paul, a short, balding Jew, who if the pictures are to be believed had quite the unibrow... and a temperament to match.

God is foolish this way, but what more would you expect from a God who uses a stuttering murderer to bring His people out of slavery, or a shepherd boy for a king, or the most depressed guy in Jerusalem to speak of how the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, or who calls a Virgin from nowhere blessed, and makes her the Mother of God, and the ark of the new covenant, who is born in a stable, and announces the news to shepherds, who wanders the

countryside with fishermen and tax collectors, and who uses a cross to atone for our sins and win our forgiveness?

And so it is that God called Saul – persecutor par excellence – short, bald, and unbrowed to bear the Good News, to bear the greatest treasure in history. Our lesson tonight focuses on Saint Paul. We’ve been thrown into the middle of Saint Paul’s second missionary journey. And we are thrown in right at that oddest part. Paul, Silas, and Timothy are going from province to province in Asia Minor only to be stopped dead in their tracks when they try to leave Phrygia and Galatia for Asia. So they try instead to go to Bithynia. But it’s not happening. The Holy Spirit says, “No.”

Why? Why does the Holy Spirit not want Paul and Silas and Timothy to go to Asia or Bithynia? Saint Luke doesn’t tell us. Perhaps it because Saint John is already at work in Asia? Perhaps some other apostle was in Bithynia? Perhaps the easiest answer is, because the Lord has work for Paul to do in Macedonia.

For just as Paul is trying to figure out where to bring the Gospel he has a vision of a man from Macedonia, saying, “*Come over to Macedonia and help us.*” So Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke go. And what do they find when they get to Philippi? Once again not what you’d expect. Normally Paul would go to the synagogue, but he doesn’t here, because there is no synagogue. Instead they go to the river where there’s water for ritual purification. And there they find a group of women. Apparently there aren’t enough Jewish males in the whole city for a synagogue. But there are God-fearing Gentile women, among them Lydia.

And now we see why Paul is sent to Macedonia. He’s sent to bear the Gospel to Lydia. He’s sent to bring the Good News to her and her household. For what does Saint Luke say? He says they spoke to the women, and God opened her heart. Her heart. Paul went all the way to

Macedonia for one initial convert. Congratulations! Most Sundays you're doing better than Paul!

Paul baptizes Lydia and her household. And now, having heard the Word and believed it, having received the greatest treasure ever, Lydia prevails upon them to stay with her and hers, *"If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home."*

And with that invitation, our glimpse of Saint Paul's work in Philippi ends, and we're left with the question what does that mean for us? Brothers and sisters, it means everything. Saint Luke is writing this, not for the Joel Osteens of the world, not even for the Billy Grahams. He's writing this for the pastor, the successor of Paul and the apostles, who labors in a small parish in the middle of a wheat field on the prairie, for the pastor who barely has enough parishioners to form a synagogue in the center of the city, for the pastor who has nothing spectacular to write-in to *Living Lutheran*, or the *Lutheran Witness*, or even *Forum Letter* because all you've been doing day after day, week after week, year after year is proclaiming Christ and Him crucified, administering the sacraments, visiting the sick, strengthening the faith of the dying, and doing the red and saying the black.

Because the Lord knows that ours is an unenviable calling in the eyes of the world – even in the eyes of many in the Church. It is exhausting – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually – no? It's depressing as you watch those people whom you love leave because of itching ears, for the next big thing, or just because they realized sleeping in on Sunday is nice and so is brunch and mimosas. It's frustrating to watch your colleagues preach social issues – be they from the left or the right – rather than Christ and Him crucified, and be forced to watch as God's people are beaten and bruised with ever more Law. It's despair-inducing to look at the state of the Church within our own tradition, let alone beyond it.

And all the while Satan has his mark set on you. He knows not just your sins, he knows your zeal for the Gospel, he knows your passion for Christ, he knows how you try to be faithful... and he is willing to use the good and bad to make you fall. Pride, anger, self-righteousness, your fear that without you the church will fall apart, your resentment, your depression, he'll use any of it, all of it, and more to make you fall. And when he does - and he will because he's had millennia of practice - he'll remind you you're a failure and a fraud. What does God think He's doing entrusting a treasure like this to someone like you? Because what Satan wants is for you to despair.

But God doesn't. God wants you to trust Him. He wants you to hear the good news of Jesus Christ for yourself. He wants you to hear and believe this: You cannot sin so greatly that your Savior can no longer redeem you. Your sins are great, your Savior is greater. You cannot fail so greatly that God cannot work it over for good. God works all things *"together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His promises."* Have you been called? Has He made His promises to you? Then He will keep them. That's what He does.

God wants you to know that the message He has sent you, you of all people, to proclaim, is meant for you as well. He doesn't just use you to bring others to Christ. He has sent the Spirit and His Word to open your heart and bring you to Christ. To bring you, you of all people, with all your sins, with all your failings as a pastor, as a spouse, as a parent, as a general member of the human race, to Christ and Him crucified.

That cross and the one Crucified on it is not just a treasure that you are to unveil for others. You have acquired it and gained that treasure that you might have it also for yourself. Lord knows you need it. Yes, remember that, brothers and sisters, the Lord knows you need the cross, you need Christ crucified, you need a Savior. It's your own Savior you are called and

sent to proclaim. He has forgiven your sins, He has entered your death, He has made His bed in your grave, so that you, you of all people, may rise on that Last Day and spend eternity in His presence. And now you get to proclaim not just what He has done, but what He has done for you.

For it is no good if Christ dies for the whole world, but not for the preachers He has called and sent. For then it would be in vain for the preacher to preach. No, this treasure, this message of the cross and resurrection, of God becoming flesh to live and die for sinners, to conquer your most ancient of foes – sin, death, and the devil – it's for you. It's for you as you are, in the place you have been placed, among the people to whom you have been called.

Just as Christ chose Saul – a short, bald, unbrowed, persecutor. He has chosen you. He has chosen you as you are. He has chosen you to give the greatest treasure to His people. So that Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection will not remain concealed, so that the treasure will again and again be unburied and opened for God's people and be "appropriated and enjoyed." Whether they number 3,000 as at Pentecost, or just a few, or even one like at the river by Philippi does not matter to God.

God isn't interested in what we see as success. Success doesn't matter to God – which should be obvious to preachers of the cross – what matters is that the Word of the cross is preached so that sinners can hear. So that sinners can hear it, and by the power of the Holy Spirit have their hearts opened that Christ and His promises may be their own. For when that happens the greatest miracle, true success is achieved one heart, one person at a time. Those who were not God's people are made His people. Those who were not holy are made holy in Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, you have been forgiven, you have been made holy, you have been united to Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection, and you of all people have the most joyous

calling in the world. Just as the man from Macedonia said to Paul, *“Come over... and help us,”* You are called and sent to come and help sinners in need of a Savior. You are called to bring Christ and Him crucified to them. You are called to bring the Word so the Holy Spirit may bring them Christ, that they too may receive Him and be made holy.

And having done that, may the Lord richly bless you with saints like Lydia, who urge you, *“If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay...”* come and stay and give them Jesus, day in and day out, come and give them the treasure you have received.

For what a great good is good news if you are there to proclaim it! What a great good is the cross if you are sent to tell about it! What a great good it is for them if you proclaim it to them! For you are called and you are sent, and the Lord who calls and sends you is faithful, even to you. Amen.