

GO! A Sermon for the 46th Annual Strawberry Festival
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Psalm 100, Matthew 28:16-20

If we briefly scan the New Testament, we may think it's more or less chronologically ordered, with the Gospels at the beginning, starting with the one that features a poor middle-eastern couple travelling to Bethlehem for the birth of their child.

Sometimes we forget that there was a time when the gospel consisted of just three spoken words first said by a woman: "*He is Risen*"

Actually, that first time? It probably sounded a little more like this:
“(panting) HE IS RISEN!!!”

Pretty soon after that there was a lot of DOUBT and REJOICING, as those who had walked with Jesus came to terms with the news. But they conquered their fear and went out to spread this three-word gospel, again and again, until someone who hadn't yet heard said something like...

(Katherine) “He is Risen? Well, who is risen? Who are you talking about?”

(Jenn) “Jesus! Jesus is Risen!”

(K) “Huh. Well, How'd he die?”

(J) “Oh, it was horrible. They crucified him!”

(K) “Hmm. Why? Why'd they do that?”

(J) “Well, because he did signs and wonders, he fed hungry people, he turned over tables and exposed exploitation, he healed the sick, he even cast out demons and restored broken people to community. Jesus ushered in the realm of God! He is the Christ!”

(K) “Really? Well, where's this Jesus guy even from? Who are his people?”

(J) "He most recently came to Jerusalem from Galilee for the Passover, but he grew up in Nazareth a carpenter's son, though he was born in Bethlehem to a priestly family on his mom's side..."

(K) "Wait, hold up. Hang on. I'm getting confused with all the details. Just go slow and tell me how this all happened!"

(J) "Well, Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to take part in a census..."

Sometimes I imagine that the gospels were written by screenplay writers wanting to create the next big hero movie.

Mark was the first to write it down, probably around the late 60's AD. He skips the origin story/birth narrative and gets right to the good stuff, with an adult John the Baptist announcing that the adult Jesus is just around the corner.

About 25 years later, Matthew had Mark's gospel in front of him when he says "I can do better than that". His story begins with a genealogy and an angel appearing to Joseph to announce the birth of the Messiah.

About 35 years or so later, the writer of Luke/Acts has before him (or her) the gospels of Mark and Matthew and some other writings and says... "Oh Yeah? I can start even earlier than that!"

Luke begins their version of the story with an angel appearing to Zachariah the Priest, to announce his elderly wife Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy.

A few years after that, the writer of the Gospel of John tops everyone by taking us WAY BACK to the dawn of time:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
(John 1:1-4)

However the story begins doesn't really matter, like any good action movie it's how it ends that's really exciting... and it all happened with those three breathless words first...*Christ is Risen.*

Those three words remind us that God is alive and active in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world, entrusting us with the message of reconciliation and love for neighbor. Those three words inspire us to live in hope and build bridges where once there was only despair and walls. God is love, God is just. And because of this good news, everyone is made a new creation.

So, what are we to do about it?

Matthew's answer is the Great Commissioning, which Peggy read for us today. Over the years, the Church (with a capital C) has heard this scripture and lifted three actions in which to focus our best efforts upon: Make Disciples, Baptize, Teach.

Why not? Sounds good, right? Makes for an easy 3-point sermon: Make Disciples, Baptize, Teach. We can all remember that.

But what if that's not, in fact, the entirety of the point? What if the most important action verb for our church's life together is the little one that we usually skip right on over? GO.

Go! Jesus says. There's a world to fall in love with, and it's just outside your window! You can see it from here! Go!

I have come to believe that the Church discovers its full identity when it participates in what God is already doing out there.

In order to find out what God is doing, we must go.
We cannot wait around to have the world come to us.
We must go out there because there is where we will meet the Divine.

You see, it's like this. It's not so much that MCC has a mission;
it's rather that God has a mission,
and God's mission has a church to make that mission happen called the Monroe Congregational Church.

We are a simply a teeny-tiny part of the bigger mission of God.

And we don't presume to bring God *to* the world;
to places like South Dakota, or Chicago, or Mexico, or Kentucky.

Because we know that God is already there: on the reservation,
in the inner city neighborhood and the verdant forest,
out way ahead of us,
already loving, saving, blessing, feeding and reconciling all of Creation.

We find out who WE are when we jump on God's Mission in the world,
when we go to the streets of Bridgeport,
when we get our hands dirty in the Giving Garden,
when we send a card to a friend who is struggling,
when we help a child survivor of trauma attend summer camp,
when we stand up in the halls of government for ourselves
and our suffering neighbors...

*that's when we find out who we are,
when we go out there and participate in what God already is doing,
that's when we are fully alive... made whole.*

For too long now, churches like ours have believed that if we offer the best religious product, people will show up. So we prepare ahead of time to have the best of those things – those commodities - so that we can be warm and welcoming so that others will find **us**; so that we can give them a faith to consume.

Don't get me wrong. Being a disciple, baptizing folks, adding to the church, paying attention to our faith formation, being welcoming – all of these things are hugely important, and we will keep doing them together in this faith community, I pray for a good long time into the future.

But the irony is that if we keep these amazing, life-changing gifts to ourselves; we stand to lose so much. When we ONLY focus on what's inside of us (or what's inside of this church), we risk of closing ourselves off to the people God loves; and the important, life-transforming things that are happening -every day- out there.

That's not what Jesus taught his followers to do!

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus sent out 70 disciples, two by two, to spread the word of God's love. He told them to travel light – don't bring a bag, or even a pair of extra sandals. He directed them to stay in different communities, to meet the people, get to know them, to live in their private homes. He encouraged them to accept the hospitality they would be given.

I don't know about you, but I'm not always comfortable in that role. My comfort zone is when I'm the host, then I can insure that everything will be satisfactory according to my needs and tastes. Plus, being a guest in makes me feel like I'm adding to a debt I can never repay.

That is why, if you give me a choice of hosting a party at my house or going to a party at a friend's house, 9 times out of 10 I'll be the one to throw the party (even though it's more work and certainly more expensive!)

But when I do, I'm missing out. Because something transformative happens when we take a chance and accept someone's hospitality. We are more likely to enjoy the food, music and art that is shared with us because we know it's a gift. We begin to understand the struggles and hopes of our hosts as they tell their stories. We learn to see them in a new (and better) light. Our love for them grows. And that love is sacred – that love is God's mission.

As you participate today in the 46th Annual MCC Strawberry Festival, remember that you are doing something big and important: participating in the mission of God in your neighborhood. Do so with your heart pointing outward, not inward. Be vulnerable. Trust in God. The more you and I do that OUT THERE, the more we will learn about who (and whose) we really are IN HERE.

The promise is that God will always, always, always find us.

*Glory be to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
One God, Mother of us all, now and forever. Amen.*