

“Who Will Go For Us?”

Sermon – February 9, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

We’ve had too easy. I don’t mean each of you as individuals; I know at least some of your hardships, even if only superficially. I mean Christianity and Christians in general. They say the church undergoes radical change every 500 years or so. 2000 years ago, of course, we kind of started the whole Christian thing with Jesus the Christ. 1500 years ago, we went from being persecuted by the Roman Empire to being adopted as the state religion. 1000 years ago, the western and eastern churches split into Catholic and Orthodox. 500 years ago, the western church split between Catholic and Protestant, which furthered splintered into hundreds of denominations.

And all this time the western church was taking over the western world and becoming the dominant religion and in the last 100 years the U.S. became the most powerful nation in the world, economically and militarily.

In the 20th century Christianity, particularly in the U.S., became a “civic religion.” That is, where duties as a good citizen and good Christian became intertwined. For most of the century, attendance at church was around 70%. Then it began to fall and in 2020 went below 50% and continues to decline.

The reasons are complex and intertwined. I’m not going to try to explain it, certainly not in a 10-minute sermon, let alone suggest solutions to change that.

I will note, though, that there are factions of Christians who appear to trying to reverse this trend. But not by being witnesses of Christ in word and deed but by force, namely by the rule of government.

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In some ways, it is analogous to when ancient Rome made Christianity the state religion. But then Christians were the persecuted minority. But in our time Christians have been privileged class where everyone, regardless of their religious faith, basically had to follow along.

The undercurrent, though, was also being white, male, and heterosexual.

In the last 60 years we as a society tried to correct some of those injustices with Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Equal Opportunity Employment Act of 1972, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974, the Respect for Marriage Act of 2022, and many others.

In the past several years most of these have been eroded and in the past couple of weeks breath-takingly even more so and in unethical, immoral, and illegal fashion.

Where are we headed? What are we to do?

In the year that King Uzziah died he had reigned for 52 years, the “the most prosperous excepting that of Jehoshaphat since the time of Solomon.”

And under the influence of the prophet Zechariah, he was faithful to God and “did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord.”

Until he didn't. As 2 Chronicles 26:16 says, “But when he had become strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was false to the Lord his God.” His last 10 years were not great.

Into this Isaiah is called to be a prophet. Isaiah protests that he is unclean to which a six-winged fiery creature flies to him and touches a hot coal to Isaiah's mouth and says, “You're good now.”

Then we have that famous verse 8, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

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Fortunately, we do not end on that high note today. God tells Isaiah to go and preach to the people essentially, “You’ll never get it. You’re a bunch of blockheads.” Isaiah asks, “For how long?” And God says, “Until everything is utterly destroyed and nothing is left.”

Which basically happens 20 years later to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and almost as bad to the Southern Kingdom of Judah eventually.

The job of Isaiah in those dark times was a difficult one; to call the people into account for their actions and lack of faith but assure them of God’s covenant; God will be there when they return.

I’m not saying things are as bad today but I’ve had more than one atheist friend reach out to me asking for some hope.

And people in the time of Jesus had similar concerns. Each of the gospels have their own slant on things.

Luke perceives his world as a chaos: hostility between traditional Judaism and the followers of Jesus, the repressive behavior of the Empire, and conflict within the church. It is in this milieu that Jesus enters.

Unlike the other gospels, here in Luke we have seen that Jesus has been healing and teaching on his own, though he has interacted with at least Simon’s family, and probably James and John. They have heard and seen Jesus in action already, so them catching a ginormous quantity of fish is simply the tipping point for them. Thus, when they reach shore and leave everything to follow Jesus, it’s not as out of the blue as in the other gospels.

Like the Apostle Paul, we have not experienced when Jesus walked the earth called those first disciples. But like Paul, we believe because of others and encounters of God in our own lives. So as believers in the

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gospel, we have hope. Paul provides a clear and succinct summary of the essence of the gospel in today’s epistle lesson from 1 Corinthians 15: Christ died, was buried, was raised, and appeared again.

By definition all Christians believe this. Where we diverge is what are we supposed to do in response?

If it’s only a creed that never touches us, or merely a “me and Jesus” project untouched by the church, then our faith is woefully immature. We have to actual do things as a result and work tirelessly as Paul did to extend God’s grace to others.

Isaiah and Jesus spoke the word of God to their own people; they were prophets. When Jesus tells Simon Peter and them “from now on you will be catching people” is calling them to be prophets.

God does not call the prophet to change the world, or even the people of the faith. God calls the church to integrity, to endurance, to trust in God despite an unfavorable response. God calls the church to faithfulness, not measurable success. God calls the church to trust in God.

Faithful ministry involves proclaiming the message despite the reaction or the response. Faithful ministry keeps the witness going.

When Jesus tells Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch,” he is asking him to beyond his own limiting beliefs.

Metaphorically, Jesus is saying there are unexplored areas of potential beyond perceived limits of resources, knowledge, and energy.

Jesus is asking us to drop our nets into the chaos of life today, that is, to witness to the Realm of God and to invite people into the movement towards the Realm.

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We, the church, continue the apostolic tradition when we offer individuals, households, and communities the values and practices of the Realm of God one that values and loves all people.

So, when the oppressed, the disenfranchised, say, as they are now, “We need more than thoughts and prayers. We need people to fight for us and helps us. Who will go for us?”, each of us needs to respond, “Here I am. The Lord sends me.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer,
Amen.