

**Great Ends of the Church V:
The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind**

Based on Isaiah 6: 1-10 and Luke 4:16-24

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As we go through this series of sermons looking at the Great Ends of the Church, we are building, maybe, in intensity. “The shelter and nurture of the people of God” is the warmest, fuzziest of the Great Ends, at least on the face of it the least controversial. “The maintenance of divine worship” too, is something we can pretty much all agree on. “The preservation of the truth” is a more intimidating task, and involves figuring out what the truth is, so that gets harder. “The promotion of social righteousness”—that’s where the rubber hits the road and we are challenged to step outside of our own needs, to make sacrifices for the good of the whole, for the love of neighbor. Because we are on our way to the last, indeed the ultimate in every sense of the Great Ends—“the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.” Today’s theme is the first on the list as it was written in 1910, but the penultimate in this series. Maybe in 1910 “the proclamation of the gospel” seemed like a straightforward task that every good Presbyterian could grasp. But in 2022, it’s still every bit as central to who we are, but it seems as difficult and complex as any of the Great Ends, except maybe that thing about exhibiting the kingdom of heaven.

We are called, according to our tradition, “to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humankind.” Of course, in 1910 it was mankind, but you get the picture. For some of us the idea that we are to proclaim the gospel to people who don’t know it is a no-brainer. Of course that’s what we’re here for, to spread the word. For others, this sounds too much like the dread Evangelism for comfort. Is our job to talk about Jesus nonstop, to threaten people with the flames of hell, so that they will be baptized?

This great end of the church raises so many questions. Two biggies come to mind—1) what exactly *is* the gospel and 2) what exactly do we mean by salvation. Each one brings its own subset of debatable issues. Things I don’t want to get into in this sermon include: is the gospel of Jesus Christ the only way to be saved because if so, that seems very unfair on all the children born in, say, Indonesia. 2) what does it mean that Jesus died for our sins and 3) what is the unforgivable sin and who’s guilty of it. If that last one seems far afield, trust me, it already came up

on a church Facebook post. All of those are different sermons, somewhere down the road.

Here's the thing about the gospel and salvation. The one thing we fully understand about the gospel is that it is good news; it is a translation of a Greek word meaning “good news,” *euangellion* a word that comes into English as the root of, yes, *evangelize* and *evangelical*. Yes, we are called to spread the good news, to evangelize. So whatever the gospel is or isn't, it isn't the news that you'll go to hell if you don't straighten up and fly right—because that just is not good news.

The good news is salvation, and I find it helpful to think about literal, physical saving. A few weeks ago a friend of mine from high school, a sweet, kind, talented guy, died of a drug overdose. What I grieve the most is how long he struggled against that addiction, maybe 30 years, with periods of sobriety and periods when he was living on the street. He couldn't receive the help he needed, somehow. And I think of my best friend from high school, who hit rock bottom many years ago and found Narcotics Anonymous and has been happy and stable and reconnected to her family. And I'm so glad, so grateful that she was saved. Physically and spiritually, because the two go hand in hand, as any 12-step group will tell you. Salvation doesn't only mean what will happen to us when we die. It also means finding a way to embrace and really live the life we have right now. Finding a way to participate in the things that give life to our neighbors and to ourselves.

We are called to proclaim good news for the salvation of humankind, and the good news is that salvation is possible. Life is not a process of decay and loss and the adding up of resentments, until we die. It's possible to forgive and to ask for forgiveness, to accept the things we cannot change, and to live. Because God is both powerful and entirely good, and God gives us life when and where and how we can accept it.

The prophet Isaiah is called—by God and all God's courtroom attendants, it seems, to prophesy. To speak God's word to a world that does not even seem capable of hearing it. Isaiah is convinced he can't do it. “Woe is me, I'm a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips!” He seems to be afraid that God's word is pure enough to destroy him and his people, because the contrast between the truth of the word and the uncleanness of human language is too great. He simply cannot speak God's truth, not without a burning coal from a divine fire touched to his lips first.

It is no easy task, to convey God's word, to proclaim the gospel. Even when we find the words, even when by the grace of God we know what to say, people are not always listening. Like pretty much everyone else in scriptures who proclaims God's word, both Isaiah and Jesus in today's scriptures are preaching to a tough crowd. Over and over, we hear that God's servants are called to proclaim, even though no one is going listen or understand. Somehow, God's message leaks out anyway. Somehow the gospel seeds are planted, even when it seems as though they are all falling on rocky soil.

I think of it as speaking in a language that we don't understand. You might think that's impossible, but I assure you, we do it all the time. I was years into learning Turkish before I found out that shish kebab is an entirely Turkish phrase. Shish means stick and kebab is a whole category of Turkish food. More amusingly, I was in my thirties before I found out that SNAFU was an acronym—I just sort of thought it was a funny word for stuff going wrong. Not really, it stands for other words, some of which are not to be said in polite company. I asked a WWII veteran about it when I first found this out, and he politely said that it stands for "Situation Normal, All ...Fouled Up." There was that give-away hesitation on "fouled." It was just so strange to think I'd been hearing and saying this thing for years without knowing that it was an acronym and actually pretty vulgar, certainly a lot stronger than I had realized.

The gospel is like that—I mean, it's not vulgar, of course. But we repeat scriptures and sing hymns and songs that may have limited meaning when we learn them, or we may think the meaning is simple. But they come back to us when we need them and open themselves up as exactly the word we needed to hear, a word of hope or a word of understanding. So we proclaim the gospel, and it may lie dormant in those who hear for years, but for some, sometime down the road, it will be their salvation.

One thing I love about putting a quote on the bulletin is that it's a way to get a little wisdom from traditions other than our own, other voices speaking about the very themes we find in scripture, whether those other voices are secular or grounded in a different faith. I have to say I'm finding the Muslim mystical poet Rumi to be someone worth listening to, someone whom as Christians we can be in conversation with.

"Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving. It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. Come, yet again, come, come." Because this too is the

gospel—come back, come again, leave behind who you were, and what you have done, and come back to the path, to the truth, to the God who is love, the God who loves you and calls you to love. As we say in the call to confession, no matter where you have been, no matter what you have done, no matter how many times you have tried and failed, you are never beyond hope, never outside of God's care, you are always welcomed and loved and called to love. That is what we are here to proclaim, and on that depends indeed the salvation of humankind.