

Smashing Mountains, Raising Valleys

With the busyness of this past week and deadlines for papers due for my doctoral program, I was tempted to do something that I almost never do. I was tempted to dig out and reread an old sermon. Not that there is necessarily anything wrong with that: Jesus says in Matthew 13:52: "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." I am under no obligation to preach a new sermon every Sunday, but 99.7% of the time I do. I think you deserve fresh food. Besides that it's easier to speak with conviction about the things that the Lord is teaching me in the present moment. If the message I preach isn't burning in me when I deliver it, I can't expect it to catch fire in you when you hear it. But, what's burning in my heart this morning is the nature of the witness that you and I as the people of God are called to be to the people around us. It's about being salt and light and about delivering living water to a spiritually thirsty world.

What I would have us notice this morning is that our Scripture passage from Isaiah 40, a Scripture that is repeated in Matthew 3 as John the Baptist prepares to introduce Jesus to the world, is a very positive, comforting, and hopeful message. It is good news from beginning to end. Isaiah 40:1 & 2 say, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD'S hand double for all her sins." Verse 9 says, "You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" Notice that God's messenger is to "bring good tidings," which is exactly what the Angel said to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus: Luke 2:10 in the King James Bible says, "And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.'" Notice again the words: "comfort my people" "good tidings" or in the NIV and TEV "good news" and "great joy." Isaiah 52:7 says, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

This is definitely good news. But what is amazing to me is that when I think of most of the teaching and training I have had over the years about how to share my faith with others, it does

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not typically begin with good news. One of the standard lines in one of the most used plans is this: "If you were to die tonight, why should a holy God let you into a holy heaven?" Now there is good news later on in that model, but it certainly doesn't start out that way. Another popular scheme for personal evangelism is the "Roman road," which begins with the good news that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." This Scripture is absolutely true and at some point everyone needs to hear it, but it's hardly the best way to open a conversation about God. The first thing the hearer of such messages hears the messenger saying is: "You are defective." "There's something wrong with you, and I'm here to fix you. Aren't you lucky?"

The problem is that if the first words out of our mouths are insulting, the person hearing us will not be interested in hearing the rest of the story. So, instead of being bearers of good news, used of God to open people up to the wonderful message of God, such witnesses run around turning people off. It's like having a remote control switch for people that has only one button: The button says evangelism, but the truth is it is falsely labeled; it's actually an OFF button in disguise. Some well-meaning would-be evangelists go around pushing the OFF button: "There, I turned another one off for the Lord!" Isn't that wonderful?

I think a lot of the trouble comes from the fact that we read the Bible not understanding who is who. There is a very select group of people in the Bible for whom the first words of Jesus are words of condemnation. They are the scribes and Pharisees, the religious professionals of Jesus' day who used religion as a power base for themselves and as a platform from which to oppress the common people and the poor. Holier than thou, religious bigots--these were the people Jesus called on the carpet. These were the only people who piqued His anger and brought forth words of judgment. But I would submit to you that we never see Jesus responding or speaking that way with ordinary people. In fact, it looks to me that Jesus treated and spoke to despised tax collectors, prostitutes, common thieves, and foul-mouthed soldiers and sailors with great respect and kindness. He forgives and heals people without asking anything in return. He delivers people from their demons, He builds loving relationships with people. There is a long list of witnesses: Zacheus, Mary Magdalene, the mad man of Gadara, a woman caught in the very act of adultery, a common thief dying next to Him on a cross like His.

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This is not to say that Jesus ignored or belittled sin. He didn't. Near the end of His conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, Jesus reminded her of her adultery and of her sin of living with a man that was not her husband, but Jesus didn't go there until she already knew that He loved her. According to John 8 Jesus told the woman caught in adultery to go and sin no more, but that word didn't come until after He had defended her against those who shamed her. Jesus loved first and gave directions about repentance later. And, if we would walk in His Spirit, we need to do the same. **We need to give people good news; we need to give them love.**

I believe in personal evangelism. In fact, I believe that word of mouth, one person to another, is the primary way the church is meant to grow and do its work in the world. But two things are absolutely necessary for those who would be God's witnesses. #1 they must be real, and #2, they must be able to communicate good news. First of all, there is nothing more important in sharing our faith with others than being real. To be real means that we ourselves must be in an authentic vital relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and be abiding close enough to Him to feel His love for people. If we are trying to reach out to people because it makes us feel better about our status as Christians, or if we are reaching out to people just because our Sunday School teacher, Pastor, or Youth leader says we should, or even if we are reaching out to others because we are truly compassionate people, that won't be enough.

No, we need to be positioned in Christ so that we can sense and really know His love for the people we touch. Only His love pouring through us will be enough to awaken others to His grace. Only when people see His love in our eyes and hear His love in our voices, and get His love in our actions will their spirits be reached for the kingdom. So job one for us is to be real and to deepen our relationship with Jesus day by day for the sake of others.

The other thing we who would be God's witnesses need is the ability to communicate good news. In order to do this we must believe in the good news for ourselves to the degree that we want to share it with others. Over the past couple of months I've found a new inroad into the hearts of other people. On several occasions I've had the privilege of looking people in the eyes and saying to them with great conviction: "God loves you more than you can imagine." Do you know what I've discovered? When

you begin a conversation with someone that way, and if you believe what you are saying when you say it, people often want to hear more. One fellow called me up several hours later and told me he needed to talk with me. Someone else invited me back for a second and then a third visit. Another person just answered with a wonderful smile. Do you remember that evangelistic clicker I was talking about earlier? Well the button on this remote has a completely opposite effect; instead of turning people off, this clicker turns them on.

So many people in our day are just like the people in Jesus' day; they are emotionally wounded and weary, broken down and discouraged. They have serious doubts about their value; they are starving for encouragement, kindness and love. And when we love them with the love of the Lord and they dare to believe that we are real, we can see their hearts open like blossoms to the sunlight. There's nothing else like it. If you want to experience something wonderful, speak blessing into someone else's life. Share the Lord's love with them. Give good news. You won't have to do that very long until miracles will begin to happen right in front of your eyes.

Isaiah 40:3-5 says, "A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

These verses from Isaiah are descriptive of many people's roads to God. They have some deep valleys, sink holes or pot holes in their lives; perhaps they were neglected as children. Perhaps they are being neglected by a spouse or, if they are older, by their grown children. Maybe they are taken for granted where they work or in their homes or in the church. They feel like no one cares--like they have no significance or value. Their lives feel like one big very empty valley.

Other people are suffering from abuse. Perhaps they were abused as children, abused by their spouse, taken advantage of by their bosses. Abused by the present economy or abused by the criminal element in our society. On their road to God are mountains of anger, simmering rage, frustration, the inability to trust, and unprocessed grief. For people such as these kindness

is an odd word and an unknown experience.

For many, many people the road to God is strewn with a mixture of rocks and potholes, mountains that need knocked down and valleys that need some filling in if they are ever to find their way to the God who is searching for them and calling to them.

And this is where we come in. Both as individual believers and together as a family of God here at Fourth Street; we are called to smash some mountains and raise some valleys, called to be highway workers--not leaning on shovels by the side of the road--but moving rocks out of the way and filling in pot holes, making tunnels through the mountains and building bridges.

What was it that Jesus said He came to do? In Luke 4:18 & 19, Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

That's what Jesus came to do and that's what we are called to do as well. Through Christ we can give people the love they missed in childhood. Through Christ we can bind up the wounds of those who have been abused. By the things we say and the things we do we can clear highways of the potholes and rubble that block people's way to God. Do you know that when we speak to anyone, our words, tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, and the ideas we share are changing the brains of the people we are speaking to? It's a scientific fact. Whenever we communicate with each other, we are changing each other's brains for good or for bad. But, as followers of Jesus Christ and as representatives of His kingdom, we need to make sure that we are changing other people's brains for the better, that we are removing mountains and filling in the valleys--preparing the way for the Lord by allowing His love in us to flow into the lives of others. We need to **let His love flow**.

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Sermon for December 25, 2011

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Isaiah 40:1-11

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