



Ben Blobaum's Sermon

JUNE 26, 2022

“HAVE NO FEAR LITTLE FLOCK”

As Christians, I think it can easily happen that we end up thinking about God's saving act only in terms of something that happened 2,000 years ago, namely, the cross and resurrection of Jesus. And to be clear, there's a sense in which that's absolutely correct: through Christ's death on the cross, salvation and the forgiveness of sins has been obtained, once and for all, for the whole world.

And so, I'm not suggesting that our reflection on God's saving act should *ever* be anything other than the crucified and risen Christ. But I do want to recall for us that God's one, singular plan of salvation is actually accomplished in TWO acts: 1) the sending of the Son, and 2) the sending of the Spirit.

Because Christ's death and resurrection are an historical *event*, unless you were there to witness it, the *only* way you or I could know about it is from someone who *was* there. For example, unless you were here a week ago Thursday at the men's ministry gathering, how would you know that we ate ice cream sandwiches, and that they were delicious?! You wouldn't; it would be utterly unknowable to you, unless I, or someone else who was there, told you.

In the same way, Act I of God's salvation is the historical event of Christ's death and resurrection, but if more are to be saved than just the few who were there to see it, word must get out. And it is precisely for this that the Holy Spirit is sent: to indwell and empower those who were there to announce the Good News of God's salvation in Christ, and to call others to join the company of his disciples.

And so, Act II of God's singular plan of salvation is the sending of the Holy Spirit to call and gather the church, and, at the same time, to establish the church as the community *through which* the Holy Spirit preaches the gospel to all the nations and peoples of earth, for God desires that all would be saved.

I bring all of this up about God's two-act salvation because our Gospel lesson today is about setting the stage for the inauguration of Act II of God's salvation of the world. An appropriate name for Act II is, *Proclamation of the Gospel*, or “getting the word out.” And in our text today, Jesus commissions 72 disciples to do just that, to go on ahead of him into the surrounding towns, with the announcement that “the kingdom of God has come near to you” (vv. 9 & 11). Which is another way of saying, “the salvation of God is at hand.”

Jesus is sending these 72 disciples on their debut missionary journey, in preparation for his arrival and the coming of the Spirit, who at Pentecost will launch the mission of the church and sustain it unto the end of the age.

Now, this is an incredibly important text for Christians at all times and in all places, but it is especially so for us today, because it gives us a picture of what we can reasonably expect to encounter as we minister the gospel in the midst of increasingly hostile territory.

“Behold,” Jesus says, “I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.” What is the sinful and unbelieving world really like? Jesus sees through every illusion and façade – though persons may appear on the surface innocent, law-abiding, respectable and nice, well-meaning and sincere in their support of social causes, Jesus sees deeper than any other human eye can see, to the ground of the heart, and he is not fooled for an instant: he knows they are wolves.

Often enough, a person's wolf-likeness may not rear its ugly head until he happens upon a lamb – a Christian. Indeed, it is the Christian's lamb-likeness – his or her identification with Christ by faith – that brings out and exposes the wolf.

Rob was a customer of Barronelle Stutzman's for nine years, during which time they developed a friendship. Barronelle owns a floral shop in Washington state, and Rob would frequent her establishment to purchase arrangements for his gay partner. Barronelle is a Christian. Barronelle knew Rob was gay. Barronelle loved Rob and used her gifts to create beautiful flower arrangements for him. Their friendship continued to grow. Then, one day, Rob came in to Barronelle's shop and excitedly announced that he and his partner were getting "married," and asked Barronelle to provide the arrangements for the occasion.

With tenderness and respect, Barronelle explained to Rob that, out of fidelity to God's word concerning marriage and sexuality, and so also, therefore, out of love for Rob, she could not in good conscience use her gifts to celebrate and participate in something she knew to be sinful. She also generously offered Rob the names of several local proprietors whom she trusted would provide stellar arrangements for their event.

Hurt, Rob returned home and told his partner, who contacted the ACLU, who sued Ms. Stutzman for discrimination. Further litigation was subsequently brought against Barronelle by the Washington state attorney general. In a patent miscarriage of justice, she lost both suits, including all appeals, her most recent loss being at the Washington state supreme court. She has appealed to the United States Supreme Court, but it has not yet agreed to hear her case. If they do not, she will lose her business.

A wolf might be your friend for years, his wolf-likeness hidden under a veil of nicety and good manners. But because Christ and his gospel call all the patterns and wisdom of this world into question and expose them as falsehood, and reveal all man's works apart from faith to be as filthy rags, so it is our lamb-likeness, our faith and fidelity to *this* Christ, *this* gospel, against which the wolf will emerge to ravage and rage. The world under the power of darkness hates Christ, but it knows that the only way it can get at and attack the risen and ascended Christ is through assaults on the members of his earthly body, the church.

To be a human creature is to exist under the dominion of another. And there are only two dominions – either one is under the dominion and Lordship of Christ by Baptism and faith, or one is under the dominion of Satan. There is no third option or category. And we are conformed to the one who has dominion over us – Christians are conformed to the Lamb of God and, so, grow in lamb-likeness, and those who reject him are conformed to the evil one who seeks to ravage and destroy the church, and so to wolf-likeness. In the world, despite all the other apparent divisions, there are only lambs and wolves; that is the real division in humanity.

In many ways, America has become increasingly conformed to wolf-likeness in recent decades. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know; we all feel it. Yet, being that it is 4th of July weekend, I do want to suggest to you that the United States of America is still one of the greatest countries on earth. And not by merely subjective standards, but by objective measures, such as justice, order, freedom, and moral principles, all of which are directly related to the presence and influence of the Christian church in our country. It's just that, today, all these are under attack from the now dominant anti-Christian revolution.

And if we take Scripture seriously, we should expect lawlessness and persecution of the church to increase. And the dreadful thing is, Jesus sends us out not as wolves among wolves, but as lambs. In other words, the church does not fight nor defend itself with the weapons of this world, and so the church is *vulnerable* to the weapons and assaults of this world. Indeed, when Jesus sends out the 72 disciples, he instructs them not to take *anything* along with them!

To be called into partnership with God in Act II of salvation, to be called into the mission of his church, entails much danger and risk. For the church becomes lamb-like as she is conformed to the Lamb of God, who laid down his life for the sake of a world of wolves that he loves so much. And so are we called to love others such that – should God require it of us – we would be willing to suffer and even lay down our lives for the church and for the sake of the gospel (1 John 3:16).

Barronelle Stutzman may lose her livelihood for her love and faithfulness to Christ; the time may soon be coming when you and I could face death for ours. But if we are not preparing ourselves now, we will not have the courage to stand when the persecution comes, as swaths of the church in America have already shown by their capitulation to the culture of wolves.

To be sent by Jesus as lambs among wolves is to walk under the threat of, and vulnerability to, the assaults of our earthly and demonic enemies. But here's the best thing about being a lamb: we have a Shepherd. "For he is our God," sings the psalmist, "and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (Psa. 95:7). Do you find yourself troubled? "As a mother comforts her child," our Shepherd promises, "so will I comfort you...and you will flourish like grass" (Isa. 66:13-14). Are you dismayed at the powers arrayed against us? "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven," assures our Good Shepherd, "[and] I have given you authority...to overcome all the power of the enemy" (Luke 10:19).

But, perhaps, there is one question to ask. What kind of a shepherd sends his lambs out *among* the wolves?! A Shepherd who also loves the wolves, and desires to redeem them as his own precious lambs. The Good Shepherd of the church both watches over and protects his lambs from the ravages of the wolves and, at the same time, sends us into their midst, for God desires that, for the sake of his Son, none should perish in hell. Barronelle Stutzman's former friend, Rob? God loves him and sent his Son to die for him, just as he did for you, and for me, while we were yet wolves.

Friends, "the kingdom of God has come near to [us]." Indeed, it is freely offered to us here today. For, shortly, Pastor Ken will lift the bread and the cup, and we will behold with our very own eyes, God's salvation, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And as we come forward with empty and open hands, Christ will gather us together as one at his Table, under the shelter of his wings, fortify our bodies and souls with the Bread of Life, and send us out two-by-two, and as a whole congregation, to get the word out; to tell everyone of the good things God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

The Good Shepherd watches over his sheep night and day, and *no one* can snatch them from his hand. So, have no fear, little flock.

Amen.