

You Are My Witnesses

✦ “Go...” (vv.12,17-20)

✦ “Stand...” (vv.20-26)

✦ “Tell...” (vv.20,27-32)

In the name of Jesus Christ our King, dear members of His royal priesthood:

Some of you are aware that during the past year we witnesses of Christ here at New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church, Shoreview, Minnesota, USA, became an official China Partners Congregation. We officially adopted this ministry to support with gifts from our budget and time from our pastor. So this Fall saw my third trip for China Partners, beginning with a week in Hong Kong. Sixty witnesses gathered from all over the US and Asia in the first WELS-Asia Translators Conference. I represented China Partners to discover how we can help with Mandarin resources and what WELS already has available to us in our contacts on both sides of the world. To me it was fascinating to hear the discussion of these many volunteers about setting up teams and the process of translating from WELS materials like *The People's Bible* into their own heart language. Some of their stories are fraught with danger. All are full of joy and determination. I couldn't help thinking of Jesus' apostles in prison in Acts.

✦ “Go...” (vv.12,17-20)

The first time God told people to “Go...” was not a happy time. Our first parents were living in Paradise with God, enjoying His fresh creative goodness in their bodies and all around. God gave them an opportunity to worship Him every time they passed the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil which He placed like an altar in the middle of the garden. You know why they failed. They wanted to be like God and be in charge of their own lives. They wanted to experience evil which makes as much sense as someone needing to experience a car wreck before deciding how he wants to drive. God said, “Go...” when He expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden. Their lives would dwindle down to death.

But God was not done with them. You know the wonderful promise God spoke first to condemn Satan in the serpent that tempted them. ***“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*** (Genesis 3:15 NIV84) That first Gospel promise fired the faith of believers for generations. Centuries of sacrifices commanded by God through Moses foreshadowed the coming of the ***“Lamb of God [to] take away the sin of the world.”*** (John 1:29) And when Christ rose from the dead, He gave the simple command again to His disciples in the Great Commission: ***“Go into all the world and preach the Good News to all creation.”*** (Mark 16:15)

So doesn't that leave you wondering what's the problem in our text? Why are the Jewish leaders so angry that they throw Jesus' apostles in jail? It started with the healing of a man lame from birth. In the Name of Jesus, Peter and John gave him back his ability to walk. Shouldn't everyone be overjoyed? The jealous religious leaders felt guilty because they had crucified Jesus of Nazareth. Now the apostles were saying Jesus had risen from the dead. In that case all His claims to be the Son of God and Savior of the world were true! Their civic and church authority was at stake!

What about us? Do we fear God more than we fear man? Do we sometimes get jealous of other people's money, family, marital status, single status, job, grades, good looks – whatever? Doesn't that kind of jealousy suggest God does not know what He's doing with the gifts He gives us? Does our own guilty conscience come from trying too hard with our own efforts instead of relying on God? Our sin shows we need a Savior too. We don't deserve our Lord's command to “Go...” as His Witnesses. Yet He sends us and tells us to...

✦ “Stand...” (vv.20-26)

Isn't this a great story? How this happened would make an awesome movie if the writers and directors would leave it the way God the Holy Spirit tells it here in Acts 5. The apostles are thrown in prison, but during the night an angel comes to let them out. As the Lord's messenger, the angel gives them the Lord's direct command: ***“Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life.”*** (Acts 5:20 NIV84) How could they refuse a simple order like that?

In the morning, surprise! Surprise! The apostles were not the only ones standing. The guards were standing too. Right outside the prison doors were the apostles had been locked up. No one saw anybody leave. ***“We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.”*** Good thing they weren't Roman soldiers! A few chapters later something similar happened when Peter was released, but the Roman soldiers were killed for losing their prisoner. For these Jewish temple guards everyone was just baffled by what had happened.

Then comes word from the temple. ***“Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.”*** The authorities were so concerned about the apostles' bold stand that morning that they very quietly went to take them away lest the people get upset and stone them to death.

✦ “Tell...” (vv.20,27-32)

Back at the courtroom of the Sanhedrin, they weren't so nice. ***“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,”*** the high priest demanded. ***“Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.”*** Peter and the other apostles replied: ***“We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”***

Do you hear the wonders we are to ***“Tell...”***? As the hymn writer put it: “Jesus gives us true repentance by His Spirit sent from heaven. Whispers this transporting sentence: ‘Son, thy sins are all forgiven. Faith He grants us to believe it – Grateful hearts His love to prize. Want we wisdom? He must give it, Hearing ears and seeing eyes.’” It's such a blessing to know that God's kindness leads us to repentance. Sure God exposed the sins of Adam and Eve as the light of His Law exposes our sins. But that's only so the Great Physician of our souls can cut out the cancer of our sin and set us back on our feet again. He wants us healthy and strong in the faith to be his witnesses. And from the power of this Good News of full and free forgiveness comes the ability to live lives pleasing to God. Obedience is first credited to us in Christ, then reflected in lives of thankfulness and praise.

This was the joy of the WELS-Asia Translators Conference – Hong Kong, 2012. Each session began with a Spiritual Focus from members of the different translation teams. We heard them praising God in their own languages. God gave His gifts in wonderful fellowship with good food to enjoy. Sometimes the food was better for one culture than another. None of us from America were excited about the chicken head on the platter. But one sister from Nepal kindly consumed it for our table. She and her father courageously carry religious materials to remote mountain areas of the Himalayas. Like our Columbian Hispanic translator, Gonzalo Delgadillo, they are eager to share God's love in their own language. And one doctor from Pakistan has a great way of sharing. In his hospital he has the workers read through translations during their break. In this way non-Christians too can hear the wonders of God in their own languages. They can see that Jesus is the Savior of the world calling us to be His witnesses.

We find joy in this Good News of our sins forgiven. May our dear Lord Jesus give us His power to ***“Go...,” “Stand...,”*** and ***“Tell...”*** What great purpose for lives of service to enjoy for all eternity! Amen.