***GREAT ENDS: TELLING THE STORY***

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Texts: Acts 13:38-39, 42-49 and Mark 1:14-15

 “Listen my children and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere…” So begins Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem telling the story of that night in Boston when Paul Revere watched and waited for a signal to come from the Old North Church Steeple warning of the British invasion – one lantern if by land, two if by sea. Upon seeing two bright lights in the steeple, Revere jumped on his horse and rode into American history, spreading the news that the British were coming. We hear such stories told and retold this Independence Day weekend when we recall our battle for American independence and our formation as a nation. They are stories with heroic figures: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, James Madison, and of course John Witherspoon, the Presbyterian minister from New Jersey who signed the Declaration of Independence. They are stories rooted in the soil of our nation in places like Boston, Concord and Lexington, Valley Forge, Yorktown and Philadelphia. They are stories with enduring symbols: the lanterns in Old North Church, the Liberty Bell, Red Coats, and a piece of parchment reading Declaration of Independence. They are stories shaped by rousing words:

*Give me liberty or give me death…*

*We hold these truths to be self-evident…*

But at heart all these stories are entwined in telling the larger story of the birth of a nation that is our nation. This weekend we celebrate that birth in story and song, with brilliant fireworks and a plethora of red, white and blue!

 The Church too has a story to tell. And like our American story it is a story with heroic figures whose names we know well: Noah, Abraham, Moses, King David and Isaiah in the Old Testament; Mary and Joseph, Jesus, the twelve disciples, Mary Magdalene, and Paul in the New Testament. It is a story rooted in the rocky ground of the Sinai, Palestine and Galilee, but also in cities: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Corinth and Athens. It is a story with enduring symbols: the Ark of the Covenant, a golden calf, a manger, bread and wine, a cross and empty tomb. It is a story shaped by rousing words:

*You shall have no other Gods before me!*

*Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.*

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God…*

*I am the resurrection and the life…*

*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*

At their heart all these stories are entwined in telling the larger story of God’s never-ending love for us and our never-ending call to love God and neighbor. It is a story of redemption and salvation that we call Gospel!

 Telling that story is the first Great End of the Church, one of those goals toward which we strive together as a community of Christ. A hundred years ago our Presbyterian ancestors described it this way:

*The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind*

which is another way of saying, *Tell the Story, Share the Good News, Proclaim Tidings of Great Joy for All People.* That is what we are called to do as the Church; in what we say, in what we do, in how we live, proclaim the Gospel. It is not just in words that we proclaim the gospel, but in actions too, for sometimes you can preach a better gospel with your hands than with your tongue, or to put it another way, “Proclaim the Gospel; when necessary, use words.” What then is the Gospel we are to proclaim?

 According to the old, old hymn it is the old, old story of Jesus and his love. According to Paul it is Christ crucified and risen. It is not the good news of something, but the good news of someone – and that someone is Jesus Christ who is God with us. As one writer has beautifully put it:

*I believe in justice; but I am not a preacher of a gospel of justice, but of the gospel of Christ who calls us to justice. I believe in love; but I am not a preacher of a gospel of love, but the gospel of Christ who calls us to love. I am committed to peace, but I am not a preacher of a gospel of peace, but the gospel of Christ who calls us to peace.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

At the heart of all those gospels – the good news of justice, love and peace – is Jesus Christ and the never-ending love of God for the world that is revealed in him. It is that good news we proclaim, that good news that makes the news of Jesus good, that good news that gives us hope with which to live and die in peace. That good news is summed up in the familiar words of John 3:16:

*For God so loved that world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.*

The good news is that God loves the whole world – not just the good, not just the Christian, not just the righteous, not the world as it should be – God loves the world as it was and is and will be – all of humankind. That does not mean God loves the way the world is, the bad choices we make, and the suffering we experience and impose on one another. It is to say that God loves us through it all – through the good, the bad and the ugly – with a love that never ends. That love is made flesh in the coming of Jesus into our midst, calling us to repent, showing us how to live in love, and proving that even death cannot restrain the power of God at work in him. Jesus shows us that the love of God for us has no limits, for “it was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us.”

 If you want to know what the Gospel is then look to the Gospel Jesus proclaimed. In the passage we read from Mark this morning the freshly baptized Jesus comes to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying:

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;*

*repent and believe the good news.*

The gospel is this promise that the kingdom of God has come into our midst in him – not that it is promised at some distant point in the future when we are dead and gone to some heavenly home, but that the kingdom is already here and we are part of it. It is hard to see it with all the pain and suffering in the world, but the good news Jesus proclaims is that it is a present reality. God reigns and is with us! We need not live in fear of anything in life or in death. We can live with confident hope and peace.

 Too often the Gospel has been corrupted by those who call themselves Christian. It has been used as a stick to threaten people with damnation unless they utter particular words or as a carrot to entice people to behave well and thus earn a spot in heaven. But the Gospel is less about incentives for loving God, then it is assurance of God’s great love for us. There is a story about Rabe’a al-Adiwiyah, a great woman saint of Sufism. She was seen running through the streets of her hometown, Basra, carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When someone asked her what she was doing, she answered, ‘I am going to take this bucket of water and pour it on the flames of hell, and then I am going to use this torch to burn down the gates of paradise so that people will not love God for want of heaven or fear of hell, but because God is God.’”[[2]](#endnote-2)

 The point of the story and the heart of the Gospel is that we love God, not because of the future promises of God, but because God already loves us, loved us before we drew our first breath and loves us long after we have drawn our last. It is that affirmation we hear spoken at the time of infant baptism in the words of the French Reformed Confession that little Andrew’s grandfather read to him this morning:

*For you, Jesus Christ came into the world; for you he suffered; for you he went through the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary; for you he triumphed over death. And you, little child, do not yet know anything about this. But thus is the statement of the apostle confirmed, “We love God because God first loved us.”*

That is the good news we proclaim – God first loves us – because it is the good news we have received – good news of salvation in Jesus Christ who died that we might live, not because we are so good, but because God is so good.

 What we are saved *from* is the threat of sin and death. What we are saved *to* is a life of joy and peace in the loving embrace of God, salvation that begins, not with death, but with life in the present kingdom of God. As Tom Wright so succinctly states it:

*The gospel is not how to escape the world; the gospel is that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Lord of the world. And that his death and Resurrection transform the world, and that transformation can happen to you. You, in turn, can be part of the transforming work*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

That is the invitation, to accept that gift of salvation and become part of Jesus’ transforming work in the world. We begin by responding to that call Jesus issued in his proclamation of the gospel: Repent and believe the good news. Repent of those sins that continue to mar your relationship with God. Repent of those things that you do that you know displease God. Repent and dare to believe we are living under the reign of a God who loves us without end. Repent and believe God’s promises! Repent and believe and then proclaim that good news to the world in what you say and what you do and how you live. In other words, tell the old, old story of Jesus and God’s love, because for the world and for us, it is good news, saving news, Gospel for the salvation of humankind – which I think includes you and me! Amen

1. Myron S. Augsburger quoted by Milo D. Stahl, *Shalom: Beyond Retirement and Death*, Masthof Press: Morgantown PA, 2009, pp.38-39 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Green, *Looking for Alaska*, Penguin Group: New York, 2005, p.174 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. N. T. Wright quoted by Leighton Ford in “Evangelistic Preaching in the Twenty-First Century”, Journal for Preachers, Vol. XXX, No. 4, Pentecost 2007, p.28 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)