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October 16, 2011



Methodology: Send Yourself to the Nations

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We are taking in these coming months and this experiment of five things: to pray for the entire world, to read through the entire Bible, to add to the community, to invest in the kingdom and today we are talking about the fifth, to send yourself to the nations. We will be coming back in the series to each of these for a more in depth look in coming months. Today we are giving a little taste of what the fifth is: the experiment of being sent to the nations. In that, we are going to

look at two powerful passages today. The first is in the 66th chapter of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah is a compilation of texts over a period of time. The context for the original audience at the end of Isaiah more than likely would have been their return from what we call the diaspora, the return from being defeated people spread out and sent out among a variety of different peoples and other lands. God's providence has brought them back now. God brought them back for a purpose, but what has quickly happened is that those of our ancestors who have had the privilege of returning quickly looked inward. They became very ritualistic. They began to focus on their worship and on themselves. It is in that light that we have these words in the last chapter of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 66:18-24

For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. From them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud—which draw the bow—to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. They shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and on mules, and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring a grain-offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. And I will also take some of them as priests and as Levites, says the LORD.

*For as the new heavens and the new earth,
which I will make,
shall remain before me, says the LORD,
so shall your descendants and your name remain.
From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,*

*all flesh shall come to worship before me,
says the LORD.*

And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

Now we look in the New Testament, the twenty fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew beginning at the 25th verse.

Now this is in the context in Matthew of what we would call Holy Week. Jesus has entered into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and, over the course of the week, he seems to come back and forth between Jerusalem and Bethany. Bethany is where he stays with some friends who are four miles away perhaps, not a long hike. In this particular context, Jesus has been in Jerusalem. He's coming out, turns around and casts his gaze upon Jerusalem. Perhaps he remembers the promise that God made in the 66th chapter of Isaiah. He looks out upon Jerusalem and begins to speak. Jesus talks about a day of judgment over and over, but this is the only time in his words in the Scriptures where he describes what that day would be like.

Matthew 25:31-45

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him,

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

That's the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The wonderful men's retreat is still going on. I came back late afternoon and it was just a wonderful time at the Outer Banks. So I'm coming back from the Outer Banks and the first station that I dial is a country music station. Country music does something to everybody. I mean, you can't not have a response to country music.

Whatever that response is is up to you. So, I listened to it all the way back and tried not to speed going through Duck at 25 miles per hour; don't want a ticket. I am thinking over time ...you know there's a lot of country music songs that have God and guns in the same verse. I am serious about that. I began to think (I have to theologize everything, I drive Sheryl crazy) and wonder how much my belief and my understanding of Christianity is shaped by my culture. I am actually really interested in that. I'm interested as I look at other cultures and am beginning to ask myself, "How much of my

Christianity is shaped by my being an American?" I am extremely proud to be and American in many, many ways.

I'm leaving this afternoon to go to Kenya a little bit ahead of our team that will be journeying later in the week. When I am there I see the HIV aides medications that come as a gift of the American people and the millions of lives whose lives are saved and shaped by the gifts and the benevolence of our people. It is one of the places where I feel overwhelmingly proud to be an American. So I'm not questioning that so much, but I'm asking how much of my life is shaped by it.

For example, I began to wear a bracelet that David Edwards gave me. I can't call it that. I'm a guy. What should I call it? This "dude" thing I got, it's got barbed wire on it. It reminds me of the millions of Christians in the persecuted church in this world who today had to worship in secret for fear of their own lives. Then I think about the freedom that we have in our own nation. None of us had to pass a checkpoint. None of us were fearful of our life. None of us thought our families were threatened by our being here. How has that shaped my faith and how do I start looking at who I am as an American and kind of see or wrestle with my culture and how it shapes my faith? I have been intrigued by this.

Here's one of the reasons that God and guns show up in the same verses. Over time we have begun to believe that God is primarily a protector. If God is for us who can be against us? Those are beautiful words. It is an important thing that God is our protector and it is wonderful theology. But God is not only our protector and defender, he is also a sender. If we ever start to be shaped by our culture to believe God's primary role is to be a nation builder we miss the point. Yes God strengthen and builds, but God also sends us. That is what we find in both of our passages today that is so very important.

God has this incredible ability to irritate us. He really can grate against us and He does it in amazing ways. For example in Isaiah chapter 66, the last chapter in Isaiah the people have returned and at least a remnant have returned from being defeated, being sent out among other people. No question about it, when our people were defeated and sent out to live among other people, they were treated horribly. They were rejected, they were persecuted. They were racially profiled. They were treated perhaps even as slaves. If they moved forward, not much better than slaves. They were always inferior.

God promises that He will bring them back. And he brings back this remnant to Jerusalem and they do what would be natural. God promises to us, look at how abused and defeated we have been, how persecuted we have been. Now we've got to become who we are. They start to worship and the way they start to worship starts to create more and more ritual and they start to identify themselves as still distinct from others. Now there is nothing wrong with that in one sense because they are distinct. They are called by God for a specific purpose. That purpose is not just to be back together, and so what God does is God shakes them up in the 66th Chapter.

He shakes them up in a couple of ways. The first one I noted as I was praying over the passage is by giving them hope and judgment at the same time. The prophets are notorious for this. It begins in the 18th verse: "for I know their works and their thoughts and I'm coming together all nations and tongues and they shall come and shall see my glory." This is an incredible promise. The nations are going to look at us. It is like Willow Creek is going to show up at First Pres and say, "Man, teach us! How in the world are you doing that?" But then in the last verse, verse 24, "and they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched and they shall be abhorrence to all flesh."

God constantly mixes this hope and judgment to remind us not to be too full of ourselves, to remind us to trust in God, and to remind us that there is still a decision in that's of hope. So that is the first thing God does in Isaiah. But here is what riles up the people even more. In verse 21 God says something that is just as inflammatory! He's already told them, "I brought you here, I got you back, but I'm going to send you back out ...to some of those same places you have already been and when you go you are going to bring more people back with you ... they are not just going to be the Jews, not just our people. They are going to be *them*, those who have persecuted us... You are going out to those nations, and you are going to bring some back. And when you bring them back," in verse 21 he says, "I am going to make some of them priests and as Levites. Not only am I only going to bring them back and give them the same promise I give you, but I'm going to make them leaders, leaders of the ritual of the worship that you have become so obsessed about." You can only imagine what the people think, "What in the world is going on?"

I think what God is saying is that, "When you see me primarily as defender you are at great risk. All the nations are to be drawn to me," God says. Our purpose to be regathered, our purpose is to come together as believers and Christians. Even this warning is to come so that we can go and collect those who are missing from the glory and the kingdom of God. God is a sender. Jesus confirms this in the passage that we considered this morning as well in Matthew 25. He begins by saying, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left."

God is letting us know, Jesus is informing us, that when that day comes all the nations will come and all the nations are going to be

judged, not only whether they were part of what we believe was the “in” group, but also this:

Here is where this passage is so meaningful and yet so dangerous to me. If you know me, you know that this is sort of my identity. I love going. I love coming back too, but I love going. I love being able to be part of a people who bring healing, who bring clean water, who bring food. It’s increasingly what our congregation’s identity is. We are a congregation that offers care and support not only internationally but also to the many nations within our own nation. Go and live a week at Park Place and tell me you don’t live in a different nation than we have right here in Ghent just a mile away. I love going and I love being able to bring something practical, tactile. I love being able to save lives by each of these, Hiv medications, clean water, by providing ministries of care and all of that .

That is what Jesus is saying in this passage. We are going to be judged by how we have done that. Jesus is also saying something else. You see Jesus is not only saying it is about how many people you brought food to or how many people you visited when they were sick or when they were alone or in prison, but he says I’m not only sending you, I am telling how you are supposed to go. I’m telling you what you are supposed to do. It’s not just about taking and carrying and bringing this stuff, it’s about something else. It’s about looking for the divine in every single person to whom we offer care.

Now bear with me for a minute as to why I say that. “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, thirsty? When was it that we saw you strangered welcomed you and gave you clothing? When was it that we saw you sick or imprisoned?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” What Jesus is saying is that when you offer that care, when you offer that support, when you offer that ministry of compassion, you look in the eyes of every single

person to whom you bring that care. See if you see the glory of the kingdom of God.

Valena did a great job teaching Wednesday night. She talked about icons and creativity. She shared a story, an ancient Jewish story, of a thousand angels going before every person and that's a thousand angels that shout out, "Make way for the image of God! Make way for the image of God! Make way for the image of God."

A lot of you know this story that is at the core of my identity. Here I am a brand new preacher from the south working and living in New Jersey not far from Trenton. I decided I wanted to help in a soup kitchen where they serve 800 people on a Saturday. This one African American church is in a bombed out area of Trenton at the time. Well, it seemed like it was bombed out. We arrive, get everything ready, but before we let people in the pastor says, "Ok we're going to gather 'round and pray." Everyone who helped gathers around and I realize there are blacks, whites, Asians, there are Hispanics, there are all different types gathered round who were holding hands in prayer.

The pastor looks over and says, "Pearl, how about you lead us in prayer this morning?" Now Pearl is a woman in about her eighties, and she's been a member there all her life. She was a little girl there, she raised her children, and her grand children even her great-grand children there. And she prayed this prayer, "Jesus, we know you comin' through the line today. We just hope you let us know which one you is." That prayer changed my life. Do you think that day and every other day when I'm in the zone of the presence of the kingdom of God that I fail to try to look and see? Could this be ...what is it that is holy? What is it that is true? What is it that is of value in every single person?

At our men's retreat--we held it in a house this time which was a great thing -- we had great speakers. Marcus Jones, our city manager was there. He did a great talk. Boyd did a great one. Chris Tyree and Weaver did a great one. Then Carlos Campo who is a member and

dear friend, President of Regent University, did one. Carlos said something yesterday that was almost an aside, but it was one of my take-always. He simply said that if we really want to respect people that we have to begin by listening, by simply just listening. As Christians, I wonder how we are at that. Are we really good listeners? Yet how important that is to be able to engage people and begin that conversation.

I started doing this a while back and it has really been a fun thing. I'm trying a lot of new things in my life, and they seem like small things but when you are the overwhelming introvert that I am these are like huge things. I have decided that I am going to, at some point, ask every single person with tattooing on their body who serves me at a table, "Would you tell me about your tattoos?" I have been doing that and it is amazing. Never once have I had anyone say "no." In all honesty about half the time they end up sitting down at the table and showing me. Sometimes they end up pulling ... and I'm like, "Whoa! No, no that's ok, just the ones on your arm, just the ones on your arm!"

So it happened to me last week in Portland while at a conference. Portland is like Colley Avenue only a thousand times edgier. Here we are, four pastors, middle age, pastor kind of guys, and we got a day together in Portland. What are we going to do? Go to the Japanese garden? We were feeling really domestic here, awkward. In the late afternoon we have a beverage and are just hanging out and, sure enough, this beautiful young woman with tattoos everywhere is serving us, and I asked her, "Would you mind telling us about your tattoos?" She sits down and starts, "This is for my best friend and this is..." As she began to talk, I began to see this amazing beauty, not in the tattooing, as pretty as that actually was, but in her face and in her eyes. "So what do you guys do?" she asks. "Well, we're here at a convention, we're salesmen." No! We said, "Well, from the way we're dressed, what do you guess we do?" She said, "Well, from the way you are dressed, you look like a bunch of preachers from the south." (I'm never going to take a call from Portland, it just wouldn't work out.)

Sure enough there was the avenue. There was the door to not only be able to listen, but then to be able to speak of something that's eternal. That is what this world needs. It needs to hear, after it has listened, to a word of love. I think it is Breeny Manning that shares the story of a little girl who grew up in a family that didn't know love. The family had a lot of Scripture and structure, but it didn't know love. And so she was always drawn to a little girl in her class, and every time she had the opportunity to go to this little girl's home she would. And there she found love. She found a family that was about love that shared and laughed, and it was just an amazing thing for her. Every night when she went home after having been there, she would cry herself to sleep and she just would think and hope that, somewhere along the way and in her life, she would be part of a family that actually loved her, that she might be worthy of that love.

That is why, as I look at all the things we do in our ministries, one that is so exciting, is our new Joy home and orphanage that just opened completely and totally. We partner with Africans who do all of the heavy lifting and loving on the children, but you're partners in that, and you provide all of that. I think of these 20 children that we have already. These are children who come from overwhelmingly broken experiences and abuse situations, 80percent are HIV positive. It is an overwhelming thing and I think at least those twenty little kids are loved right now. They have a mom and a bed and a place to stay. I think there is something eternal in that. I think that is what we are called to be because it is not just about going and doing and listing all we do, but about seeing what is eternal in the midst of it. We are able to know that there is something divine, that there is something of the image of God in it – in every single person of all the nations, even those who at this point who don't know Him.

Kathy is a middle-aged woman. She is about 44. She is going through a mid-life crisis, living in Ohio. When you go through a mid-life crisis in Ohio what are you going to do? I don't know. So, Kathy decides that she's going to train her body and start working out, start taking better care of her self, eating better. She's going to

try to be a new person. So Kathy starts doing that. She eats better, takes better care of herself, and starts walking. She discovers, "Hey, I really like this walking thing." And then she's trotting and soon she is running. Kathy decides she's going to make a goal. She said, "I have decided to run an incredible 10-K race in Cleveland." She starts training for it. She gets all the books and reads in them that you really don't have to have run 6.2 K to do it, but if you have run five miles, the next 1.2 will just kind of happen because you are in the flow and the crowd motivates you.

Sure enough, Kathy starts working and she gets to the point where she registers for the race. Right before the race, she makes her first five miles ever in her life. That morning she gets there. If you have ever run a race, you get there and there are all these people and every one is excited and there is all this energy in the morning. Kathy gets there and there are thousands of people. She gets in line and the gun goes off and everyone starts running and Kathy starts. She thinks in the first mile of a line from the movie *Chariots of Fire* that "when I run I feel his pleasure," a beautiful line.

She's going and she just keeps running and now she thinks, "I feel great, but I must be going slower than I thought I was because this is taking a long time." She is still thinking, "I'm with it, I'm with it." Then, all of the sudden, she looks over and she sees a marker and the marker says "8." She stops and she looks at the judge and says, "What does the "8" mean? He said, "Well, that's the mile marker. That's the 8 mile marker, you've run eight miles." She said, "I'm in a 10k race, it's 6.2 miles." He looks at her and says, "Lady, you're in the marathon!" She never had run more than five miles in her life, and now she's run eight miles, and she finds out she's in a marathon. Now Kathy could have quit right there and said, "I've run three miles further than I have ever run in my entire life."

She could have left it at this amazing victory, but that's not Kathy from Ohio. She kept running. Every time she would see another marker she would stop and say is that the nine mile marker? Ten mile marker? Every time she did she'd just tear up the official, "I

can't believe you put me in the wrong race! You should have had better signs!" Then she would catch her breath, drink some water and keep on running! At the end of the day, and I mean this literally, at the end of the day, Kathy ran an entire marathon--26.2 miles! Until that morning she had never run more than five miles in her entire life.

Here's the truth for me and my life where I am today. In many, many aspects of my life, the race that I prepared myself to run is not the race that God has put me in. When I was a kid, a young guy, I had it all figured out. I knew what classes to take, what kind of people I needed to be around, to date. I knew that I had it all figured out, what race I was going to be in. I believed I was ready for it but you know, sometimes the race you are in isn't the race you prepared for. I've come to realize in my life that I have a choice. I can just stop. I can say, Lord I have run further than I ever thought I could. I just can't do it anymore. But I've come to realize that the race you have is the race you have. If you keep putting one foot in front of the other, if you keep reaching toward the goal.... The apostle Paul says the Word of God is true and that there is a prize waiting for us and that prize is not just a life well run. That prize is the offering of eternal life.

I don't know if that story means anything to you today. The race you have is the race you have to keep moving forward in. The faithfulness of God will be there. Here's the whole thing for me. How many people in this world are out there running a race that they are not prepared for, for what ever reason? What ever circumstance of their life, their family, what disease they have just by coming through the birth canal.... How many people in this life have said, "Hey, I know the kind of guy I need to be." I mean there are eight thousand guys in college. There's got to be one who says, "I know the job I need to have. I know the way I need to raise my children and I know..." and it just doesn't always turn out that way. How many of those people in this world need to know and believe that there is a prize at the end. I believe there are millions. I believe they are in all nations, including our own.

I believe that you and I have the privilege simply to say this. When we run across someone on that path or that trail or that road or in that race for us to be able to run alongside them and say, "Just one foot in front in the other and the victory is going to be greater than anything you can imagine." When you do it, just look over long enough to gaze into their eyes and say, "Is that Jesus?" When they look at you they will see something of the Holy Spirit in you. Our God is not just a nation builder, not just a defender. He's a sender. He says this is the good news. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the hope of the world! Visit, heal, bring food, bring the water, Always look, "Is He you?"

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