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“SEND YOURSELF TO THE NATIONS: SEND NOW, ARRIVE BEFORE CHRISTMAS”

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The series we are in is running until June. We're asking people to take the Praxis Experiment (really five experiments) which, we believe, if you try, will have some huge impact on your spiritual life. You know what those five are if you've been with us. They are to: pray for the entire world, read the entire Bible, add to the community, invest in the kingdom, and be sent to the nations. The last few weeks we've been talking about being able to pray for the entire world. Today we're going to book end it. We're going to

move into the next of those experiments, to be sent to the nations, which is at the end of the praxis acronym. We're asking you to consider two percent of your year for an outreach, a mission. It can be done as a trip or as a variety of different opportunities. You can find them in the brochure. Please seriously consider this.

In that light, we're going to look at two passages today. The first is in the sixth chapter of the prophet Isaiah and it's really, as I would say, the beginning of the Book of Isaiah even though it's in the sixth chapter. It's where we get kicked off in who Isaiah is and what the Book is about.

Isaiah is a book of hope. If I had to use one word for all of Isaiah, it would be a book, a testimony, of hope. I was thinking about it this morning. I was putting some markers in my Bible and—(I love this Bible. I've had it longer than I've been a pastor and it's falling apart, but it's my Bible. It fits in the neck of a guitar case. It's been all over.)—I was noticing that there are sections of it that are getting so worn, like my fingers have just rubbed off a lot of the words and there are other sections that, although I read through it (I try to read through it at least once every year.) that aren't quite so worn. Leviticus never seems to get worn for some reason, but the Psalms are crinkled and dog-eared. And I was noticing that it's the same for Isaiah.

I love the prophet Isaiah. I love the hope that he offers. Now, Isaiah is writing this in somewhere around the year 740 BC. He is writing it in the last year of the reign of King Uzziah who was a wonderful, godly king. But Uzziah's son, Jotham, and in particular his grandson Ahaz, are less than exemplary. So, as we read this, we realize that it is written at a time of great doubt and fear for the people. In fact, it is written at the time at which God's favor will be removed because of leadership and the response to Isaiah's prophecy.

I want to pay particular attention to a couple of the things that are in here: the grandeur of God—think of how big God is—and what Isaiah says. He talks about his lips, not his heart. I think there is significance to that. Then, pay attention to what God says back to him. Listen for the word of our Lord:

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

In the New Testament we are in the first eighteen verses of the Gospel of John. A number of scholars believe that this was actually added to the Gospel of John by the writer, perhaps around the time that he wrote his letters, First, Second, and Third John. The reason they believe that is because it stands out. It seems that verse nineteen would be a good beginning for the gospel, but the first eighteen are just so powerful; they really transcend.

The early church had symbols for all the gospels and the Gospel of John symbol was always an eagle because they believed the gospel just soared in its power. It's broad. It's really a retelling of the beginning of the Book of Genesis. It's planting Jesus as the Word, present before creation, making Him God, making Him the Son of God, and yet making Him human. It's beautifully done. Listen again for the Word of our Lord:

John 1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 8The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.(John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

That is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I learned early on never to apologize on a Sunday, so I'm not apologizing, I'm just commenting. I'm drinking more coffee than normal. I'm tired. I had a great Thanksgiving weekend. We went up to Jersey to be with our (sort of) oldest adopted son and his kids and their family: a seven year old little girl, three year old little boy. We were there for three days. Boy! It wears you out!

And then I didn't sleep well last night because I was so wired. We got in yesterday, and I started watching the University of South Carolina Gamecocks play the Clemson Tigers. That's one of the greatest rivalries in the history of the world, and the University of South Carolina just whooped up on Clemson so much. It was really just one of the most glorious experiences for me. The seven people I know in our congregation who are admitted Clemson grads, I'm sorry.

Anyway, I was so wired when the game was over I that I couldn't go to sleep, so I'm worn out. I've been thinking about this, this whole idea of "partly being worn out" is based a little bit on technology. I went to bed on time last night, and I had said that I wasn't going to watch the game on TV. However, I had my ipad next to me. I just got a new ipad not too long ago. I opened it up and, sure enough, I started watching the game on the ipad before I went to sleep.

This whole sense of technology is amazing. I'm really behind and I'm trying to think of how to get caught up. It's amazing what's out there. Thomas Friedman, two Sundays ago, wrote an op ed in the *New York Times* talking about ipads in one format. He's talking about a university in India which is trying to find and be in relationship with what it might call "the last person," meaning, the last person in India, the most distant, the poorest, the one in the most remote village.

They're trying to find a way to be able to reach everyone in India, and they're trying to develop this through technology. So this university (which is sort of an India equivalent of MIT) has actually gone to work, done research, and completed the building of a small tablet like an iPad. It uses an Android 2.0 system, 3G, and wireless. It's got a seven-inch screen and a three-hour battery that they can produce at a profit for about thirty to fifty US dollars.

They're working with the Indian government to not only provide for the cost of the technology to get the information to the iPad, but also to then be able to sell these iPads at a much reduced cost to the poorest of the poor in the most remote areas.

The belief is that with this technology, they can put information and education into the hands of people who most desperately need it. The thinking would be that the education would be something that would be of the greatest benefit to what we might call "the last person."

I think about that and how wonderful that is: to try to bridge that gap from what separates you from the last person on the earth. That's really what we're called to do as believers who are called to go unto all the nations. We're called to go to the last person. Here are some people who are really putting some feet on it and are trying to find a way to reach them in that way.

As Christians, what is it that we are supposed to do? What is it that separates us from the last person on the earth? When we think about those who are poor and live in isolated areas, those who are perhaps even hopeless – what separates us from those people?

In the western world, the western mentality, and for much of my life what I believed was what separates us is money. If we gave them money, those kinds of resources, they would be okay; everything would work out for them. And the reason for that is because, in my

culture (and within my religious culture so very often), so many things are measured by money. It's a good, easy measurement for us.

But, if you talk to someone who is truly out there (in a sense the last person, the most separate or distant from us), one of the things I've come to realize is that very often when they think about their poverty and when they are asked to define their poverty, very seldom do they use solely the issues of money.

It's not just about money, as significant as that might be. We have to be able to provide food for our children and housing for our families and all of those things, but the kind of language they would use instead of that of money is the language of, "I have no choice in my life. I make no meaningful decisions for my life. Everything is choiceless in my life."

I find that interesting because Seth Godin, the largest blogger in the world, wrote his most recent book (which I'm reading on the iPad, by the way) which is called *We Are All Weird*. Godin is weird and he thinks "weird" is a great term. He uses it as a positive thing when looking at the postmodern world. What Godin says is that the definition of the modern and postmodern world is simply this: that we are living in a world increasingly defined by choices and that we're supposed to offer choices to others. It's what we might call freedom.

Fritz Kling lives in Richmond and runs a multimillion dollar mission organization. He wrote a book not long ago called *The Meeting of the Waters: 7 Global Currents That Will Propel the Future Church*. In it he tells of an encounter he had when he was looking at a mission opportunity in Ukraine. He was invited to spend an evening with five Ukrainian theology graduate students who were young people in their twenties, all of them excited about practicing their English, all of them very eloquent, all of them deeply grounded theologically. The church is actually doing really well in Ukraine in many ways.

The protestant church is just growing at leaps and bounds. There is a tremendous amount of religious understanding and growth taking place there.

Kling is with these five men and women in their twenties. The one thing over which they stumbled was when he asked them, “What hope do you have for the future?” That’s where their language was lost. They didn’t know how to answer; they didn’t know how to respond. It’s not as if they didn’t know the vocabulary definition of hope, but it became very clear to him that they didn’t know what hope was. You see, Ukraine is still a product of the Soviet regime where parents lied to their children and children lied to their friends and teachers ...and all the dysfunction that is there in the Ukraine. Today, the lack of hope results in the fact that 70% of all pregnancies in the Ukraine end in abortion. It’s a hopeless place.

What Kling began to realize was that here are people who know what it is to have an eternal hope and promise in Christ, they know what it is to believe in the promise of eternity and all of that, but they lack hope in their own life.

That’s why I think the prophet Isaiah is so meaningful for us because Isaiah is really all about hope. It’s a hope, not only about something eternal, but it’s also about a hope living today—what it can mean for you to have hope in today’s world. When we open up Isaiah, we see that what’s happening is very much like what we are talking about in today’s world. We’re talking about what separates us and what draws us together. For Isaiah, what separates us initially is not each other, but what separates us is God.

When we come to stand before God, He is so big and awesome that even the hem of his garment is so big that it fills the temple. Everything shakes when God is around and this understanding for Isaiah is essential. It’s that we have to remember that we are separated from a huge, powerful, awesome God. We are so separated

that when we realize how big God is, we come to truly grasp ourselves as small as we are. We start to recognize just how small we are. The thing that is so incredible about it is that, when we recognize how small we are, we recognize how much we have in common with each other.

Isaiah shouts out, "I'm a man of unclean lips and I come from a people of unclean lips." What Isaiah realizes is that he has so much in common with his own people when he is in the presence of God. He is as sinful as they are, as broken as they are, that it's the distance of God that brings us closer together. That separation is what lets Isaiah know that he really is the last person. He is so separate from God that he's the last and so he cries out, "Woe is me." That's all he can do. And that's the beginning of his ministry because he comes to realize, not only how big God is, but how much he shares in common with the sins of others.

I've shared this with some of you before. I was a brand new Christian (just within months of accepting Christ) and Sheryl and I went with some friends, whom we had met from a congregation we had joined, to New York City. We spent a wonderful weekend: plays, museums, the kinds of stuff that you do in New York. One morning we got up and went to breakfast at McDonalds. I don't eat at McDonalds much, but this was the most amazing McDonalds in the world. It had five stories!

When you come from South Carolina, a five-story McDonalds is amazing. It was just beautiful! It was in Manhattan. It was like everything was scripted for us, so scripted that it looked like the people were actors and actresses playing out roles. So scripted that it was so amazing – straight out of a commercial. I remember a little boy came walking up the steps. He had his tray and his breakfast- his egg mcmuffin, hash browns, and a big glass of orange juice- as he walked up the steps.

I think it must have been his dad behind him with his big smile. It was a perfect morning until the little boy stumbled a little bit, lost his balance, and his orange juice fell over. It didn't have a lid on it so it went all over him and all over the floor. The boy stopped for a moment and the father looked down and realized what was going on. The father's smile immediately vanished and he looked down and said, "You stupid idiot. How stupid, how worthless could you be?"

And that little boy (I've seen it happen so many times even with animals, they know the pose to go into.) shrunk down and the father said, "What are you worth?" That little boy immediately, in a response that he had learned, said, "I'm not worth anything." The little boy had orange juice all over him; orange juice is on the floor. They sat down and the father angrily started unwrapping everything and throwing it in front of him.

I went and I sat down. We're sitting at the table and these friends of ours from our church, after a couple moments of silence, simply whispered, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*" (Gen 4:9) I really didn't know that was in the Bible at the time by the way, but I thought it might have been. I thought it might have been just a way for us to be able to quote something and not do anything. I've carried that with me a long time.

Now, here's my point of sharing that with you. Something happened in my life that day, in the way I identify with that little boy. It really did. There's a heart that I didn't know was present in my life that God opened up to me that day that has changed and shaped my life from that time forward. As sinful as I am, it changed it. How easy it is to identify with that little boy. Every one of us, at some point in our lives, has had experiences where we have been trained to think we are hopeless or useless, or not worth anything.

The way we've been treated, the way we've thought we've been treated - if we are really honest with ourselves we should be able to not only feel but to identify with that little boy and I believe that's part of the Gospel for us - to be able to do that.

But here's what Isaiah would say. He would say it's not enough to just identify with that little boy. He would say that if you truly want to be a person of God, you have to also be able to identify with that father. You see, it's so easy to identify with the little boy. He's the down trodden, the abused, the beaten, but if we are to be the people of God, we have to identify with that father.

That's what Isaiah knew. He knew when he stood in the presence of God, as huge as God was, that what separated him from the worst person on the earth was so small in comparison to what separated him from God. *"I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."* I'm not worthy.

And here's the same thing for us. I look at this world, and I think of its brokenness, and it overwhelms me. There are so many times I just weep for the world. I think of what happens and what's going on and the way it's being played out at Penn State, for example. The pain and the anguish that that brings to so many people, and I think about the abuse and all of those issues that are overwhelming to me. I need to tell you by the way, and I don't think I've ever said this in public, that I myself was a victim of sexual abuse as a child. I know what it's like.

We need to live in a world that holds people accountable. We need to be in a world that says this is wrong, it cannot be tolerated, and it cannot be accepted. We need to live in a world where people are accountable for their actions, but we also need to realize that it's those who are abused who so often become the abusers.

We need to realize that we are all people and children of God. I'm not in any way trying to excuse, all I'm simply saying is that whatever we do, however we live out our lives, however we hold people accountable, we have to do it in a way that does not seek God's judgment. We have to simply do the best we can do with what we have because we're all sinners.

I'm in no way excusing, please, but I'm simply saying this: that when we think we are separate from each other and allow ourselves to make other people become evil incarnated in themselves and say, "just look at how horrible this is..." or "how could this father do this to this child..." or "how could he bring this upon him..." it's no wonder that we then start to forget that each of us could easily become the person we are decrying.

If you don't think you can, you're in greatest risk. If you don't think that these things are possible within your own life, if you had been raised in a certain way, if you were placed in a certain environment, if you don't think that you're at great risk because of... This is what we need to know. We're an unworthy people but we stand in the power and the glory of God, that is what can set us free, that is what can be the coal that is placed on our lips that gives us a new life and a new hope, that's what gives us hope.

That's what I believe we're told in the Gospel of John. When Jesus comes, the Word became flesh. So we realize that we do have a choice. We have a choice in how we respond. We have a choice in how we live. You see, not only was Isaiah learning that what separated him from his own people, from the sinners of his own life, was so small in comparison to what separated him from God, but he was also realizing that he had a choice.

This is the only time in the Old Testament where a prophet is actually not given a direct call, but God says something needs to happen. He words it in an interesting way, "*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,*

'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'"

What happens is that God gives Isaiah the choice. Isaiah has the choice to turn that sinfulness of his life, now that it has been blotted out, into something for the glory of God. That's what our call is, to be able to speak this truth into the world, to say to the world, "You have a choice." To say to the world that it doesn't have to stay that way. To say to the world that there is a hope, that it doesn't matter what you've experienced or what has been inflicted upon you or how you've inflicted something upon someone else. To say, "There is a hope and a promise in the Gospel of Jesus Christ if only you claim it."

So, I'm sitting in the quiet there at McDonalds, years ago as a brand new Christian, realizing that God is doing something in my life. I'm identifying with that child in some way. I look and realize one of the people in our party was gone. I just sit there and wait in silence in that moment of quiet, and the next thing I know is she comes back, walks up the stairs, and she has a glass of orange juice that is two or three times bigger than the little boys' glass.

She places that huge glass of orange juice right there on the table in front of that little boy. Then she looks at the father and she says, "No little boy should have to eat a breakfast without something to wash it down." She turned around and walked back, sat down at our table and I thought, "Oh Lord, I hope he's not mad! Golly, what's going to happen? Leave it to a woman to do that, just stirring things up!" I've been living with that woman for more than thirty years. But here's what I've come to realize.

What Sheryl did that morning was not just a gift for a little boy; it was a gift for a father. To be able to say in a nonjudgmental way, "Look at your life; it doesn't need to be that way. No matter what's happened. No matter how you've been treated. No matter what's gone on in your own life. No matter your own experience with your

own father. No matter what; no matter – it doesn't have to be that way. You have a choice. Love that little boy with all your heart and put those words of love on your lips."

That's what I believe you and I are given to do. I believe that's why we are being sent out into the world, to be able to simply say to the world, "You have a choice, no matter what you've experienced, no matter what's gone on – if you've been on the receiving end or you've been on the giving end – you have a choice. And that choice is all based on a hope that comes in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh."

So what about you today? I would challenge you to take the two percent challenge to be sent into the nations. The second challenge is simply, "How am I going to bridge that gap between the last person in my life?" That's an interesting question because the last person in your life very well might be someone in India, Africa, or China; it might be someone for whom you might have the opportunity to be able to offer care or support in some way; the last person in your life might be the last person that you think you're going to reconcile with, the person, perhaps, that you've tried over and over and over and it just doesn't work. You finally said, "I just have to kick the dust off," but for some reason God won't let that person out of your heart.

What is it that you're going to be able to do to reach that last person? How might you invite someone to come and be with us in worship? How might you offer prayers? I would encourage you to offer your prayers. We believe that prayer does change everything. God says, "*who will go for us?*" What are we going to say?

Let's pray,

Father, I thank you for your love and grace. I thank you that you are so mighty that just the hem of your garment fills the entire temple. I thank you, Lord, that when you show me how magnificent you are,

and how awesome and huge you are, you remind me of how little separates me from, perhaps, even the overwhelming pain in this world. I pray, Lord, that you would give us the gift of your Spirit in such a way that we would bring hope, that we would say to this world, "You have a choice," and that we would be able to be the people of love and grace. It's in your powerful name that we pray.

Amen.