

The work of the church

Acts 1:1-9

January 8, 2006

What can we say? What can we say?

Very early Wednesday morning, the folks gathered in Sago Baptist Church in Sago, West Virginia, got the heartbreaking news that twelve of the thirteen coal miners trapped by an underground explosion were dead. Just hours before they had been celebrating reports that the twelve were alive, ringing the church bells and singing together: *Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art ...*

What can we say? That their faith in God was misplaced? That they were foolish to think that their prayers could make any difference? That God abandoned them? That God was never there at all?

What can we say? What do we, as followers of Jesus, have to say in the face of death?

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die ...

Also on Wednesday, the prime minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, suffered a massive stroke accompanied by extensive bleeding in his brain, leaving the future direction of the Israeli government and the Middle East peace process very much up in the air. What can we say? What can we say about the man and his policies and the catastrophic event that has put his life in jeopardy? Do we say what Pat Robertson said the next day: *[Ariel Sharon] was dividing God's land and I would say "Woe unto any prime minister of Israel who takes a similar course ..."*?

What do we, as followers of Jesus, have to say to those who await the outcome of this illness and wonder what comes next?

Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children!

This last October, Senator John McCain proposed an amendment to a defense spending bill that would expressly ban the use of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by any agent of the United States government against any person anywhere in the world. The amendment was overwhelmingly approved by the Senate, but opposed by a White House that was reluctant to in any way tie the hands of those interrogating suspected terrorists. What can we say? We do not condone torture, but we not want to undermine the administration's war on terror. We believe in the principle of human rights, but we wonder if absolute adherence to such a principle is realistic when dealing with people without any principles.

What can we say? What do we, as followers of Jesus, have to say in this new era of terror?

I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven. For God makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike ...

We do have something to say. As followers of Jesus, we do have something to say. And that's evangelism! Having something to say is evangelism ...

Say it: *evangelism* ... Feel the word in your mouth: *evangelism* ... What do you think? Do you think you could get comfortable with that word? I hope so, because evangelism is the work of the church. Evangelism is the only work of the church: *you will be witnesses for me*, Jesus said.

The work of the church is evangelism. If not, what else might we suppose the work of the church to be? It is not the work of the church to dispense practical advice for everyday living: how to raise your kids, how to lose weight, how to straighten out your finances, how to be successful at your job, how to be a good citizen. Our belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ will certainly impact how we do all of those things, but it is not the work of the church to proclaim the tenets of our collective human wisdom. It is the work of the church to proclaim Jesus.

And it is not the work of the church to build a fellowship of like-minded friends. Friendship, fellowship, companionship, mutual support will certainly result from the faithful work of the church, but it is not the work of the church to spread the good news of our own friendliness. It is the work of the church to spread the good news of Jesus' love.

We are witnesses for Jesus, attesting to the ways Jesus challenges our assumptions, transforms our thinking, changes our hearts, enlarges our compassion, and leads us to do unexpected things in unexpected places. For example ...

As followers of Jesus, what do we have to say when national leadership cuts funding for programs that benefit the poor while, at the same time, reducing taxes to the benefit of the wealthy?

*My heart praises the Lord,
my soul is glad because of God my Savior,
for God has remembered me, his lowly servant ...
The Lord has stretched out his mighty arm
and scattered the proud with all their plans ...
The Lord has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away with empty hands ...*

As followers of Jesus, what do we have to say when Iowa's legislative leadership calls for the reinstatement of the death penalty?

*You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."
But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you ...*

As followers of Jesus, what do we have to say when the church of Jesus Christ is torn apart by conflict over issues of homosexuality and abortion and war and worship styles and inclusiveness?

*It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus.
You were baptized into union with Christ ... So there is no difference between
Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women;
you are all one in union with Christ Jesus ...*

That's evangelism: having something to say, bringing Jesus into the conversation. Evangelism is not about making converts. It is about witnessing to what we have seen and heard from Jesus. It may be that as a result of speaking on Jesus' behalf, someone who hears may be convinced to follow Jesus too, but the convincing is God's work, not ours. It's our job to let the light shine, not to compel people to walk in it.

And evangelism is not about getting people to come to our church! Evangelism has nothing to do with getting people to come to our church! It may happen that as we are faithful witnesses for Jesus, people will want to share our fellowship and do the work of the church alongside us, but our job is to tell the story, not to build an institution.

We are witnesses for Jesus, telling the good news that the power of the resurrected Jesus -- a healing, restoring, reconciling, renewing power -- is even now at work in us and in our world. For example ...

As followers of Jesus, what do we have to say to the person who cannot let go of the past, who cannot get out from under the burden of his own mistakes or of the injuries done to him?

Everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence. But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free ...

As followers of Jesus, what do we have to say to the person who is convinced that she has nothing to contribute, that her wisdom and abilities don't measure up?

The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all ...

As followers of Jesus, what do we have to say to the parents who feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of protecting and guiding their children in this decadent and dangerous world?

There is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord ...

I will be with you always, Jesus said, to the end of the age ...

We do have something to say, and saying it, speaking good news, evangelism, is the work of the church. It is important for us to remember that as we celebrate our 150th anniversary. Our purpose is not to keep this institution alive for its own sake, but to keep this institution alive for Jesus' sake. We are a church, a church that happens to be situated in Waterloo, Iowa, in the year 2006, and it is our job to be faithful witnesses for Jesus in this time and in this place. We gather for worship and for study and for prayer to be encouraged, to be strengthened, to be equipped to take the good news into the world: to Jerusalem, to all of Judea and Samaria, to Waterloo, to all of Iowa and the Midwest, and to the ends of the earth.

The good news is this: Jesus is alive ...

Jesus is alive and the power of God that raised Jesus from death is at work in us, bringing new life to the dead places in our lives. Tell the world! Let your light shine!

Jesus is alive and the power of God that defeated death is at work in our world confronting death in all its guises and disguises. Tell the world! Let your light shine!

Jesus is alive and the power of God that makes all things new is making you new. Tell the world! Let your light shine!