



**SUNNYVALE**

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*From the Pulpit*

### **Sermon ~ A Day of Good News**

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ May 15, 2011

#### **Romans 1:14-17**

Scripture introduction: In our Old Testament reading we are told of a time, 2800 years ago, when Ben Hadad, the king of Aram, marched with his army in order to lay siege to the city of Samaria, capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Now to understand his tactics, you need to know that Samaria was a city with great natural defenses. It was situated on top of a plateau 300 feet above the plains. In fact the city was so well protected that a full scale attack was next to impossible. Instead, Ben - Hadad surrounded the city with a blockade, cutting it off from all hope of resupply, and then sat in his camp at the bottom of the hill and waited for the embargo to have its affect. It didn't take long for that to happen and soon Samaria was plagued with famine. But caught between the famine and the invaders – literally caught, stuck sitting outside the gates of the city – are 4 men who have leprosy.

#### **II Kings 7:3-9**

I think I look ridiculous in a helmet. Correct me if I'm wrong... please! But I think I look ridiculous in a helmet. I don't know if it's my broken and bent nose or the color of my eyes or just because I'm wearing it *with a liturgical robe* but I look ridiculous in a helmet. *Nevertheless...* this past season I started wearing a helmet while skiing because as a ski patroller I know that helmets save lives. (The fact that I was able to put headphones in the ear pads so I could listen to music while cruising the slopes made the decision a little bit easier!). So: I may look ridiculous but *I'm not ashamed* of my helmet because I know it can save me on the slopes.

The apostle Paul says a similar thing about the gospel, that is the good news of God's love made known through Jesus Christ. He's aware that some people find sharing the gospel awkward and difficult – people don't want to impose their beliefs or offend others or appear holier than thou and so they have a hard time sharing the good news of God's love. But not the apostle. In our Romans passage Paul says, "I am *eager* to proclaim the good news; and I'm not ashamed of the gospel *because* it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." For the apostle, when you've got good news it's hard *not* to share it. But *as Presbyterians*, talking with other people about our faith may not be as easy for us.

Saturday afternoons I've started answering the phone by saying, "Sermon Central!" because I know it's probably my Presbyterian pastor daughter calling from Tucson to talk about her sermon for the next day and pick my brain and files for a few ideas. When I talked to her

yesterday I thought about a time years ago when Nancy was not feeling well and was back in our room, and Alison came skipping through the house -- she was probably six years old -- and she skipped up to me and announced, "I love Jesus very much". And I thought, that's great and told her she should go back and tell that to mom because she wasn't feeling well and that would cheer her up. But Alison simply said, "Nope, it's a secret!" and skipped off. And I thought: how did she become a Presbyterian so quick? And so well! It's all too true that Presbyterians have a hard time sharing their faith – that we keep secret the good news in our lives.

Of course, there are others who seem to have no trouble sharing their faith at all: a few years ago I had a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses ring my door bell but when I answered instead of going into their witness they only wanted to know if I had any Spanish-speaking neighbors that they could visit. (I didn't know whether to be relieved or offended that they didn't want visit with me!) I said I didn't know of any Spanish-speaking neighbors but told them, "If you come across any lapsed Presbyterians send them *my way!*" You may not like their methods but you have to give them credit for being willing to share their religion. But see, I don't think people want to hear about "religion". What people respond to is the good news that energizes your life.

Because here's the thing: good news can't be kept quiet. I mean, think of a time in your life when something terrific happened. Maybe you became engaged; or maybe you got into the college of your choice; or after months of unemployment you just got a job – or think about crossing paths with a new grandparent loaded with fresh photos: see what I'm saying? We get it that good news is for sharing. So what good news do you know?

Our II Kings text is about 4 lepers who find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. A foreign army surrounds their city; sanctions are in effect, a military blockade prohibits any re-supply so that a famine is growing within the city walls. People are desperate, families are starving, the Scriptures report they are resorting to barbaric actions just to survive -- -- in the midst of all that *certainly* no one has any interest or concern for the four lepers who sit outside the city gates.

And so they decide they'd be better off throwing themselves upon the mercy of the Arameans than sitting un-cared for outside their own city gates. So they go down to the enemy camp but soon discover that God has caused the Arameans to hear the sound of advancing troops in the middle of the night and in terror the entire army simply runs off leaving *everything* behind.

It doesn't take long for these lepers to realize that they have stumbled upon unimaginable wealth and seemingly un-ending resources. In a flash their lives of desperation and want are completely changed. They go from tent to tent, eating extravagant food, putting on wonderful new clothes, and carrying off piles of silver and gold. In one brief moment, they are changed from lepers of shame into lepers of joy. Suddenly they have been catapulted into affluence and luxury. It's like their struggling startup just got bought out by Microsoft or Google: you can almost hear them shouting for joy in the verses of this text!

But then suddenly, they stop; and there is this wonderful moment of realization. Right in the middle of celebrating their new found riches, one of them says to the others, "Hey, what we are doing is not right. We do not well. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. That's not right. Let's go tell the others."

The lepers understand that good news is for sharing and you shouldn't keep it to yourself. A few years ago a Mercedes Benz TV commercial showed their car smashing into a wall without any injury to the test dummies. The announcer's voiceover explains that the safety system demonstrated here was developed by Mercedes-Benz and had been copied and used by many other automobile manufacturers. Someone then asks the company spokesman why they don't enforce

their patent and keep the others from using their ideas. His reply: "Because some things in life are too important *not* to share." Some things in life are too important *not* to share: God's love for us in Jesus Christ is one of those.

What I like about the story in II Kings is that the lepers – as outcasts and shunned people of their society – the lepers are the most *unlikely* of people to be the harbingers of good news – the last ones you'd think would be the ones through whom the whole city would be saved. And I love that fact because it says that we don't have to be special people to share the good news of God's love in our lives. We don't have to be an ordained pastor; we don't have to have a theology degree; we don't have to know all the answers to the really hard questions people ask; we don't have to live perfect lives or even be without doubt in our own faith – the good news comes from unlikely places but can make a lasting difference.

I took some vacation in March to guide a wilderness trip down in the Bahamas for a commercial outfitter. For a week we kayaked and camped on the sugar white beaches of these completely uninhabited islands. One day a couple of the clients and I were walking one of those remote beaches – no one else on it -- and we came across a bottle with a note inside. Up-and-down our West Coast and in 5 different countries where I have paddled my kayak and walked the shoreline's I've never before found a bottle (picture #1: of bottle) with a note in it. So we were excited to take it back to camp and to open it up (picture #2: opening bottle). Inside we found a couple of pieces of paper that we discovered had been sent by a little boy named Paolo 4 months earlier and 300 miles away on Long Key in Florida. The bottle had floated across the Straits of Florida to Great Guana Cay where we were camped. We opened the bottle and carefully pulled out the papers inside. The first page (picture #3: orange page) had an ark on it and some glitter and an elephant and a verse from the Bible. The second page had a note on it (picture # 4: white page note) with a hand-drawn picture. The note said, "If you do not have a friend pray to Jesus, O Lord God, and sing to him: now you have a friend. Love, Paulo. (Picture off)

There was a contact e-mail on the bottom of the note with the e-mail address of Paolo's pastor. I wrote his pastor and told him we found the note and asked a little bit more about the story behind the bottle. He said that a man in the church had found a bottle out on a fishing trip in the keys and there was a note in it from someone who said they didn't have a friend. The fisherman shared it with the children of his church the next Sunday morning during the children's sermon and they decided to send a note back out upon the waters to tell the person that Jesus would be their friend.

I asked the pastor to tell Paolo that finding his note gave me a chance to talk about God's love and Jesus as friend to the participants on my trip and that his planting the seed by launching the bottle provided me an opportunity to build on his witness and share God's love with people he had never met.

And we re-launched the bottle but first added our own note to what was already there including a verse from Isaiah 43 where God says, "When you pass through the waters I will be with you." We also put my e-mail address on it and then stuffed it back in the bottle, resealed it and at the end of the trip when we got picked up by a motor boat I had us motor out into water that was over 1000 feet deep and we threw the bottle back out upon the waters to see how the witness might continue. From the most unlikely of places good news can emerge.

Who knows how your words and deeds of service – how your life and faith may affect others? Who knows how you may be just one touch along the way for someone to ultimately come to know God's love personally. Who knows but that you will have a chance to talk to a friend that someone else has already spoken to and they may be ready *this week* to make a new change in their lives and become a friend of Jesus. The truth is that in the most unlikely of places and out from the most unlikely of people God's good news goes forth and people respond.

This is a day of good news. If we are silent we will have missed an opportunity; therefore, let us go and tell others of the good news of God's love that comes to us in Jesus Christ.