

Amidst the Wolves

Luke 10:1-11

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By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

It has been said, “There are two great moments in life, the day you are born, and the day you discover the reason why!” People throughout the ages have discovered a holy purpose in life through faith in Jesus Christ. That is what those first disciples experienced, those seventy sent out two-by-two as an advance team, to prepare the way of the Lord. Those first ministers, emissaries, or ambassadors of Jesus were not professionals. They were fishermen, and IRS agents, and artisans, and homemakers. They came from every walk of life.

The joy of discovering a holy purpose for your life is for everyone. Last week we installed Rev. Jessica Vaughan Lower here in ministry. This week we commission all of you and send you out to engage in that same ministry.

Today it is common to talk about the need for good leaders, and there can be no doubt good leaders make a world of difference. But I want to explore the converse idea that it depends, at least as much if not more, on what followers, the faithful, the people in the pews, are willing to do – and how they conceive and see their own lives as important to the outcome, how they see that their lives are on the line, with something at stake in bringing about a different and hoped for future. That is really what we mean by “every member in ministry” and there is a seat for everyone on this train so “Get On Board.”

The entire biblical story is a story of rescue and recovery. In the beginning, the whole creation was good but it got off track early on in Genesis, leading to murder, and death, and a twisted, defaced and broken reality. Just read the news and you can see things are not as they ought to be. In Genesis 12, God began a rescue operation long ago by calling Abraham and Sarah to leave the life they had known and enter a covenant with God. They and their descendants (the chosen people) would be blessed to be a blessing for the world. All seventy of the nations would find new blessings through the people of the covenant. However, the rescue operation itself went sideways. In the words of N.T. Wright, “Right from the beginning we run into the problem that

will haunt the narrative throughout: What happens when the lifeboat, which sets off to rescue the wrecked ship, is trapped between the rocks and the waves, itself in need of rescue? What happens when the people through whom God wants to mount his rescue operation, the people through whom he intends to set the world to rights, themselves need rescuing, (they) themselves need putting to rights? What happens when Israel becomes part of the problem, not just the bearer of the solution?"¹

God then mounts another, deeper rescue operation to recover the effort, and continue the goal of setting the world to rights. God does this through the chosen people, and the gift of the only begotten Son. God rescues individuals then sends them out to be a blessing for others. The seventy were sent two-by-two as an advance team. The number seventy is not arbitrary but a way of saying that God's intention in Christ is to restore the rescue operation so the entire world can be put to right. Luke is the only Gospel to tell this story because Luke has a passion for the universality of the Gospel. We have a role to play, just like those seventy. We are part of the operation. You don't get to sit back and watch this narrative, this storyline, hoping it turns out okay in the end. You and I are also called and sent for the sake of the future that is to come.

I read about the 150th Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. A new history of the battle has been written, "Gettysburg: the Last Invasion," written by Allen C. Guelzo. It focuses upon the psychology of the fighters, the foot soldiers during that battle. Another historian, James McPherson, also looked at the private letters of Civil War soldiers sent to their loved ones, to determine what they were thinking. David L. Brooks of the *New York Times* wrote about both authors a few years ago. Compared even to soldiers during World War II, the earlier Americans "... were motivated by the sense that they were living up to some high moral ideal. Words like 'gallant,' 'valor,' and chivalry' dot their descriptions of each other's behavior."² Brooks concluded, "These letter writers, and many of the men at Gettysburg, were not just different than most of us today because their language was more high flown and earnest. There was probably also a greater covenantal consciousness, a belief that they were born in a state of indebtedness to an ongoing project, and they would inevitably be called upon to pay these debts, to come square with the country, even at the cost of their lives."³

1 Wright, N.T. *Simply Christian Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006) p. 75

2 Brooks, David, "Why They Fought" *New York Times* Op Ed July 2, 2013 A21

3 Ibid.

As we prepare for Election Day this week and the coming of Veterans Day next week, it's worth remembering that at critical times in our national history, common people lived with a sense that *they* were part of something important, something remarkable, that *they* were living up to some moral ideal, that the scales were tipped and history moved toward a better future. It's not only leaders that need to embody our ideals, *each of us* must also embody those ideals or it becomes meaningless and the rescue operation stalls. It's not simply what sacrifices our leaders are prepared to make, it's the tipping point for those in the trenches and those in the pews who are willing and able to face the wolves themselves.

So Jesus sends them out like lambs amidst wolves. There is no mention of Visa cards so they can expense their respective missionary excursions. There is no mention of a travel allowance or mileage reimbursement. Jesus shows organizational ability by appointing a crowd of traveling evangelists -- but not bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is the art of making the possible impossible. They are given painfully simple instructions, "Go out and be yourselves." They are to let God happen through them to others. The power of God comes through human beings. The power of God is not just some amorphous, timeless reality, according to Jesus. It's a spiritual reality communicable through people. People committed to Jesus Christ. When people meet up with a bearer of the power of Christ, that power is communicated. God rescues people, we don't. But we need to show up. And when we do, there is a profound blessing. Peace to this house!

A sense of covenantal consciousness began for the followers of Christ long ago. They came to believe that they were part of "an ongoing project" that belonged to God. They understood that their lives were called to a higher purpose, that they were living for a great transformation of human life, and in fact, a transformation of all life that God intends. The Church is the custodian of that vision, that belief, that higher purpose and ongoing project that belongs to Christ. The power in the first century, as in our time, is not in those who are sent but in the one in whose name they are sent. They were not called to be successful, only faithful. Nowhere does Jesus tell them to worry about the results of their efforts. He tells them flat out that some are going to reject them. The success rate in of this rescue operation is nothing close to 100%. Never has been and never will be.

"There are two great moments in life: the day you are born, and the day you discover the reason why!" People throughout the ages have discovered a holy purpose in life through faith in Jesus

Christ. We expect leaders to embody our values and we become disappointed when they don't. But do we become as disappointed in ourselves when we don't measure up to those same ideals? We've been called to Jesus Christ, and we are being sent into the world to be part of the rescue operation, to set the world to rights. Let God happen through you to others. The power of God is not just some amorphous, timeless reality. It's a spiritual reality communicable through people — people committed to Jesus Christ. When people meet up with a bearer of the power of Christ, that power gets communicated. Remember, God rescues people, we don't. But we need to show up. And when we do, there is a profound blessing. We have been blessed to be a blessing to others. Thanks be to God!

