

Sermon for Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod Assembly

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May 31, 2008

Luke 1: 39-57

“Called Together in Mission: Faithful and Bold”



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The assembly theme for our time together has been “Called Together in Mission: Faithful and Bold.” And during these days together this assembly has come together in mission and taken some faithful and bold steps by electing a bishop to serve the synod for the next six years, by adopting resolutions that will move this synod and this church forward in bold and faithful ways, and by lifting up and affirming the various ministries of this synod and the rich connections you share with your global companions.

So how appropriate it is that the gospel lesson appointed for the day that is the conclusion of our time together is Luke’s account of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth..... Luke’s account of two faithful and bold women whose mission of proclaiming God’s distinctive reign and God’s distinctive blessing would change reality for all who would come after them. As an older, childless woman and a youthful unmarried virgin come together, each with children in their wombs, not fully aware of how the missions they were on would further God’s kingdom, you and I are given the opportunity to ponder with them the amazing power and awesome wonder of our God. You and I can join with them in awe and wonder and excitement, while also daring to ask their unspoken question: “what does this mean for us?”

Elizabeth acknowledges with her voice the wonder of the one whom Mary will soon proclaim through the pains of childbirth. Mary, who in her youth and humility kept her pregnancy quiet throughout its term would in faith be called to share her child with the entire world.

I am intrigued by the behavior of pregnant couples I have known lately. With joy the pregnancy is announced and chronicled and discussed and studied as the birth is prepared for. People can’t help but hear about it, know about it, and share in the joy of this new life. But once the baby is born the parents are resistant to share it with others.

We have friends who recently became grandparents. They anxiously awaited the birth of this first grandchild and couldn’t wait to warmly welcome it into the family. So, you can imagine their surprise and their hurt when the parents...this couple’s own daughter and son in law weren’t sure they wanted them to let them hold the new baby because they might not do it correctly. In an effort to protect the child, the parents wanted to keep it all to themselves.

How often, church, are we like those over protective parents? How often do we, who have been given the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for our very own, with the command to share it with others, act like we want to keep it to ourselves? We find it easier to be the church together ...tight knit, caring for one another, honing our skills at being alike and being a closed family....than to be the church together in mission, welcoming all people, and coming together in excitement and anticipation confident that we will be empowered to go out and further God's kingdom and be Christ's church in the world.

In the article "We are the Body of Christ," missiologist Craig Nesson writes, "The church of Jesus Christ continues to have as its authorized mission the furthering of the kingdom of God. This is the aim of Christ's work and the creation's ultimate destiny: the subjection of all things to God's reign. The church serves as God's agent in the world in faithfulness to the mission of God's kingdom. The church prays and worships in order to be formed as people of the kingdom, and then moves into the world as leaven of that kingdom. Being the church is not the point. The kingdom of God is the point!" Furthering the kingdom of God is the point. So what are we waiting for?

When the angel Gabriel came to Mary to announce that God had chosen her to be the messenger of the Gospel she was perplexed and asked "how can this be?" I'm poor, I'm lowly, I'm unmarried"but in faithfulness she boldly responded, "I am a servant of the Lord; Let it be according to your word."

God is calling this church to be in mission...to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people here in your communities, throughout this church and throughout the world. I wonder...when we hear this call, are we also perplexed and ask "how can this be? We are poor...giving is down. We're lowly...membership is down. We're unmarried...its hard to get people to commit because they have many leisure and school activities competing for their time." We come together in mission, but whose mission is being carried out....ours or God's? Whose needs are being met? Where would you and I be today if Mary had kept that baby all to herself?

At what point does God's power to take what is and create what can be stun us out of our fear and our survival mentality and move us forward...move us out.... with faith and boldness into a revival mentality...into the mission God is calling us to do? To be the church that God is calling us to be? What are we waiting for?

Luke tells us that when Mary came to visit Elizabeth the child Elizabeth was carrying leapt for joy at Jesus' presence. When was the last time you leapt for joy at the realization that Jesus is present with you every day? When was the last time you stopped to think that the Holy Spirit is at work in you gifting you for call you have received as a baptized child of God? It's amazing. We have been named. We have been claimed in the waters of baptism. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ

Jesus. Yes our congregations face problems of aging and declining membership, yes the communities around us are changing and we lack confidence in how to reach out to them with the Gospel. But God comes to us and says, "I have chosen you. I am calling you to bear the good news of my son and his death and resurrection to the world."

The Holy Spirit is at work now, gifting us to carry out this call. Jesus is present here with us now, and always will be. We've been given a mission to share the Good News of Jesus with others. To go and make disciples. To seek justice and love kindness. To love our neighbors as ourselves. To further God's kingdom in the world. So what are we waiting for?

In a short time you and I will leave this place, having worshiped together and prayed together. We have heard God's word and shared in Christ's supper. We have pondered with humility how God could love us so much that God would call people like us to carry out the mission of furthering God's kingdom in the world. We have leapt for joy that Christ is present with us and in us and is working through us for the sake of others. May we also leave here empowered to see our congregations with new eyes, not as social clubs for the select few where we fight to hang on to the way its always been, but as centers of mission, where we ask what God is calling us to do, and then in faith and boldness like Mary we say, "here I am Lord" and go out and do it. God is calling us. What are we waiting for?

Amen