



“The Long Road into God’s Future”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, NC

February 22, 2006

Up to this point in the gospel of Matthew these had been relatively high times for the disciples and perhaps even for Jesus himself. From the advent of our Lord in Matthew's gospel, Jesus had been growing in reputation and identity, healing the sick, casting out demons, raising people from the dead even, and calling his disciples to his side. But now Jesus' ministry will begin to take a new turn as he starts speaking of his authority in the kingdom, and empowering the disciples to do his work - both the more overtly rewarding work, and the profoundly difficult. Our text today is part of a larger eye-opening speech recorded in Matthew, where Jesus tells the disciples to shake the dust of any city that will not receive them off of their feet for God's wrath will be great in the end, and that he came not to bring peace but the sword. These verses occur just after Jesus commissions the disciples to go out to heal and cleanse and preach the word to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Our reading begins in Matthew 10:16 and ends in the 23rd verse.

[Jesus said to them] "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

Boy, what a word Jesus delivers. The disciples had pretty much been living the high life, I guess you could say, when Jesus drops this bomb of a message on them, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves." "Prior to Easter, Jesus' disciples did not carry on a mission to Gentiles, did not suffer for the sake of Jesus' name, did not stand before governors and kings."¹ But now, he says, things will soon be different. The life of faith is filled with healing power to be sure, but promises also to be filled with struggle. No one wants to get into trouble - rock the boat at home or with your colleagues. No one likes to be a part of politics and tension in the church or workplace or to be put on trial before a judge or a priest or a jury of your peers, but by asking for Jesus to faithfully lead them, the disciples were now learning that they were inadvertently asking him to lead them into suffering and conflict. Suffering and conflict for his name's sake. I wonder when the disciples had started getting that sick feeling in their stomach when he was talking - that feeling that makes you want to just curl up into a ball and dissolve into the woodwork to avoid the kind of firestorm he is describing here. No wonder he had said, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.' What kind of wages could possibly be compensation enough for the kind of work he was calling them to do? Life is too short - can't we just hurry up and get to the part about the good news?

¹Leander Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1996, p. 259.

From where we sit today, Jesus' word seems almost fanatical - we have so manicured our faith that there is little room in our religious framework for the kind of call that Jesus is describing - one that overturns the status quo and causes everything to be thrown into turmoil. For us sitting here today it may seem difficult to call up a scenario where the discussion of faith would cause prosecution, let alone persecution. But Matthew's record of Jesus' life was kept for his own church of Christian missionaries both at home and away. Folks that knew first-hand the power of persecution and the meaning of not only sacrifice but suffering for their faith and who needed a word of encouragement. In the post-Easter world of Paul and the other disciples, the witness of Jesus Christ would drive a wedge between families and loved ones, would arouse people to passionate defense, and anger the religious leaders dedicated to keeping the peace to the point of murderous rage against missionaries soon turned martyrs. Jesus would only be the first to suffer for his claim to kingship, but more would soon follow for the sake of his name.

But for those of us in a culture that boasts religious freedom, we find ourselves amidst a different kind of persecution - one that threatens not our lives perhaps but certainly our livelihoods. And we find that the foreshadowing of things to come in Christ's word to the disciples translates into a call to each of us to the mission of the church that remains raw and real. It is the call to look with hope into God's future and trust that steadfast commitment to his ways will lead to triumph in the kingdom of God even though it may mean trouble here on earth. It is a reminder that we are to speak boldly for our faith - proclaiming not only the work of Jesus Christ, but preaching Jesus as Christ though we may fear trial and rejection. Christ's words take what is perhaps the most terrifying prospect - the breakdown of our families and the death of our children - to remind us that even they must be surrendered to the Lord in order for us all to realize our true family in the household of God, and be reminded that our loyalty to Jesus is to have priority over our very closest human relationships and even over life itself. Christ tells his disciples that to truly confess his name and bear witness to his truth will require letting go of our fear over what others may think or do when we profess our faith, placing our loyalty to God above all else, and trusting that in his wisdom God has provided for our future and the future of the church through these very acts of surrender. The pathway to that future will not be easy. But it is promised.

Gerald Sittser² is a pastor, professor, and theologian who has suffered a great deal in his life, not because of persecution but because of a horrible accident. On a desert road late at night, a head-on collision with a drunk driver claimed three generations of his family: his mother, his wife, and his young daughter. While he did not stand trial because of his faith, he describes in his book, "A Grace Disguised," an experience of his faith being on trial in the face of despair. I've shared this story with a few of you before, but it bears repeating as I think it illustrates the kind of commitment Christ is calling us into as we seek after the kingdom and face the kind of hardship Jesus is describing, or any hardship for that matter, along the way. After viewing the bodies of his family in the morgue before their funeral and being driven into a deep and dark grief, Sittser writes, "I had a kind of waking dream shortly after that, caused, I am sure by that initial experience of [existential] darkness [after seeing them]. I dreamed of a setting sun. I was

²Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1995, p. 92.

frantically running west, trying desperately to catch it and remain in its fiery warmth and light. But I was losing the race. The sun was beating me to the horizon and was soon gone. I suddenly found myself in the twilight. Exhausted, I stopped running and glanced with foreboding over my shoulder to the east. I saw a vast darkness closing in on me. I was terrified by that darkness. I wanted to keep running after the sun, though I knew that it was futile, for it had already proven itself faster than I was. So I lost all hope, collapsed to the ground, and fell into despair. I thought at that moment that I would live in darkness forever. I felt absolute terror in my soul.

A few days later I talked about the dream with a cousin of mine, who is a minister and a poet. He mentioned a poem by John Donne that turns on the point that, though east and west seem farthest removed on a map, they eventually meet on a globe. What therefore appears as opposites - east and west - in time come together, if we follow one or the other long enough and far enough. Later my sister, Diane, told me that the quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west, chasing after the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise.”

We may chase after the kingdom that Christ promises until we are weary with exhaustion, but only when we turn and face the challenges to our faith, enter into the fear that holds us back from the full expression of our discipleship, and trust that in the darkness of trial we will be led faithfully to the light of God’s mercy, can we begin to move forward in the mission of the church and the work of the kingdom. Only when we accept that the long road before us requires the bold proclamation of the private celebrations and inclinations of our souls, the trust that the Spirit will speak for us when we do not have the words, and the surrender of that which we hold most dear, will we then move into the lavish fullness of the future that God has so faithfully prepared. Perhaps it was this understanding that prompted Sittser to write in the dedication of his book, “Blood is thicker than water, and faith is thickest of all.”

These are the hard words that Jesus is calling each of us into. This is the mission of the church. The resounding message of Christ’s life and ministry and of our discipleship is not ‘lambs to the wolves,’ but rather, ‘The one who endures to the end will be saved.’ Amen.