

## OUR MISSIONARY GOD

ACTS 11:1-18

“This church has ten years.” I can probably count on one hand the number of times in my life I have felt as if God has spoken directly into my spirit in a crystal clear, very direct, almost audible way. I heard that message back in 2006 when I was serving, at that time, as your Interim Senior Pastor. During those first few months with you, I began to appreciate this church’s wonderful history as well as to observe its challenges in both the present and for the future. “This church has ten years.” What does that mean? Basically, it was an implicit call to get busy and an explicit reminder that there is a finite window of opportunity that must be seized. I interpret that statement to mean that our congregation needs to find ways to establish effective ministry bridges to a changing Northland community over a ten year period of time – roughly 2006 - 2016. Otherwise, our spiritual effectiveness as a center of Christian ministry and influence in the community will diminish and even our long term existence will be called into question. But most importantly, we will not realize our purpose and calling as a congregation of God’s people.

“This church has ten years.” That creates a sense of urgency within me about my ministry in this place and our ministry together. That led me to a decision in the fall of 2010 to pursue a Doctor of Ministry degree. I realized I just needed to get better equipped myself to help lead our church through this critical time in our history. So, I began taking classes last year and it will take me until probably 2015 to complete that work. In my first class, we were asked to select one ministry issue that we wanted to study. Here’s what I selected. “How does an established local church such as Karl Road Baptist Church create effective ministry bridges between itself and a changing community so that the Great Commission can be fulfilled?” Every class I take, every book I read, every paper I write and whatever project I select at the end of my course work addresses that issue in some way, shape or form.

Brothers and sisters, hear me well. I don’t need more letters after my name. I don’t feel like I need to advance my career at this stage of my life. I’m studying and working at this stuff because I sincerely want to be better equipped to figure out along with you what God wants for our church and how to follow wherever He leads. The church’s leaders have given me enthusiastic support in pursuing this degree. Thank you! They are providing generous financial assistance. Thank you! But pray with me that what I study and learn will end up having practical value for our church. Thank you for your prayers! Keep ‘em coming!

“This church has ten years.” So, how’s it going? Over the last almost six years, God has done some very encouraging things in our congregation. We’re becoming more outwardly focused. We’ve changed our entire governmental structure. We have a more positive, unified morale and momentum. Perhaps most significantly the Lord led us to revisit and rethink our unique mission and vision as a congregation. That led to the crafting of a mission and vision

statement that we launched in the fall of 2010. That statement now appears on our bulletin every Sunday. Over the next three Sundays I want us to do a kind of review of our mission and vision. Towards that end, let's recite our mission statement in unison together: "We seek to glorify God by building a family of believers passionate about Him where people are loved the way they are, urged to become more like Christ and equipped to share Christ in word and deed." Now, next Sunday Cheryl and I will not be with you. Our oldest daughter, Natasha, is getting married down in Florida this coming Saturday. But our Long Range Planning Ministry Team will be using the message time in next Sunday's service to share some wonderful ways God is helping us to live into and walk out this mission statement. You'll be very encouraged by that service. Then I'll be back to share some additional thoughts with you on February 19.

I've already learned some great stuff through my Doctor of Ministry classes. One truth has come to me with great force and I wanted to share something of that with you today. It's the simple but powerful truth that God is a missionary God. Let's get at that truth by looking at a passage of scripture in Acts 11. But before we read together the first 18 verses of that chapter, let me give you some background. The resurrected Jesus has ascended back to Heaven. The Holy Spirit has arrived and the Church has been born. All of the first believers are ethnic Jews. One of the key leaders is Peter, one of Jesus' disciples. In Acts 10, we're introduced to a man by the name of Cornelius, a Roman soldier who is being drawn to God by the Holy Spirit. At this time, few of the first Christians if any – again all of them were ethnic Jews – seemed to understand that the message about Jesus was intended for everyone all over the world. Peter has this vision from God that calls into question this inbred exclusion he had towards people from other races. Peter ends up at Cornelius' home and shares the message of Jesus with him. Cornelius receives Jesus as Lord and Savior right there and then and it's very evident that the Holy Spirit now lives in him. Let's pick up the story from there and read it together.

That story reminds me that God has a mission. And even the Church He had just called into existence had better not become an obstacle to what God wanted done. In fact, if those first Christians had known their Old Testament better, they would not have been surprised by or resistant to what had happened to Cornelius. Here's what the prophet Isaiah had said 700-800 years earlier. God is speaking and He says, "You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me. I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." (Is. 49:6 NLT) What does it mean to be a missionary? One of its basic meanings is being someone who is sent with a message from one place to another. So, the first truth I want you to reflect on with me is that because God is a missionary God...

**GOD SENDS HIMSELF.**

When you think about God – who He is and what He’s like – you get very quickly into talking about what are called His attributes. God is holy. God is loving. God is gracious. God is just. God is merciful. God is all-knowing or omniscient. God is everywhere at once or omnipresent. God is all-powerful or omnipotent. Those are God’s attributes. In other words, mission is an essential part of God’s nature, personality and character. Mission is something that God is not just something that He does or something His Church does.

I believe the Bible teaches that God is a missionary God. Acts 10 and 11 clearly underlines that truth. Now, mission means sending and that is a central theme in the Bible to describe what God’s been doing all through human history. God’s mission began with the call to Israel to receive God’s blessings in order to be a blessing to all the other nations and people groups of the world. God’s mission unfolded in the history of His people across the centuries recorded in Scripture. God’s mission reached a climax in the person of one Jesus of Nazareth – through Jesus’ life, teaching, miracles, death on the cross and resurrection. In Jesus, God sends Himself. In Jesus, God reveals He is a missionary God. God is literally with us in the person of Jesus Christ. That’s what we just celebrated and thanked God for when we received communion. God sent Himself.

What does the most well-known Bible verse say again? “For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” (Jo 3:16 NLT) What does that word “gave” mean? I think the very next verse makes it only too clear. “God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.” (Jo 3:17 NLT) “Gave” and “sent” mean the same thing! Because God is a missionary God, He sends Himself. Did Jesus Himself recognize He was sent by God? Absolutely! Jesus said, “... ‘My message is not my own; it comes from God who sent me.... If you trust me, you are trusting not only me, but also God who sent me. For when you see me, you are seeing the one who sent me.... I don’t speak on my own authority. The Father who sent me has commanded me what to say and how to say it. (Jo 7:16, 12:44-45, 49 NLT)

When the Holy Spirit arrived on the Day of Pentecost, God sent Himself again in a different way. Jesus said, “‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 NLT) Through the Holy Spirit the Church is created and empowered to continue God’s mission of spreading the good news about Jesus Christ. It continues today in the worldwide witness of churches in every culture to the gospel of Jesus Christ. God’s mission will continue until the creation of the new Heaven and the new Earth. This mission belongs to God from first to last. God owns it. God takes responsibility for it. God ensures its fulfillment. God relentlessly advances His mission in variety of ways and “the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” God is a sending, missionary God. A second truth follows necessarily from the first one. Because God is a missionary God ...

## **GOD SENDS HIS CHURCH.**

We've already observed how God sent Himself in and through the person of the Holy Spirit to create and empower the Church. Empower it to do what? To fulfill God's mission of bringing men, women, boys and girls from every nation, tribe and people group into a new and eternal relationship with Himself. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8 NLT) Earlier, Jesus had said, "... 'All authority in heaven and in earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'" (Mt 28:18-20 NIV)

Mission is not just an activity of the Church; it is an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. God sends Himself. Mission is a movement from God into the world and the Church is an instrument for that mission. As a result, God sends His Church. Will there be obstacles and opposition? Sure! But Jesus didn't provide any way to wiggle out of this, did He? No, instead, He just assures us that His own authority will guarantee the result. The long term implications of Jesus' words are clear. Every generation of His followers and every local gathering of the Church universal – including Karl Road Baptist Church - is called and charged to fulfill Jesus' mandate in our own time and context: make disciples. There are no acceptable excuses or justifiable reasons for failure.

So, let's bring all that down to where we live here at 5750 Karl Road in Columbus, Ohio. This church – like every church - is called to be a missionary church. That means God wants to send us out and into the Northland community where He has placed us. Remember, missionary means being sent, it means going out. God sent Himself. God entered our arena, our neighborhood, in the person of Jesus. He didn't expect us to find our own way to Him; He came to us. He didn't expect us to take the initiative; He took the initiative. So, what does that mean? It means that as a church we always need to be on the look out for ways to get into the lives and community of Northland residents. Sometimes that will literally mean doing ministry away from this building. Why? Because we realize many lost people will never walk in the door of our church without our first taking the initiative to reach out to them in some way, shape or form. It means having an outward, initiative taking attitude in all of our ministries even if they happen inside the building. As an example, right now God seems to be giving us favor and opportunity with children: tutoring, clubs programs on Wednesday nights, feeding kids during the summer months. So we're trying to figure out ways to not only minister to those kids, but to their parents and their families.

If God is in control of this whole mission, then we don't get to decide to whom we're going to be sent. We've just got to follow wherever the Holy Spirit leads.

Isn't that the message of Acts 10-11? The Holy Spirit sent Peter to Cornelius. And much to Peter's amazement, Cornelius – a non-Jew - gets saved! Peter begins to understand that God has a larger and broader agenda than just redeeming Israel and saving Jewish people. That must have been an incredible – and kind of humorous – scene there in Acts 11 when Peter gets called on the carpet: "You went into the home of uncircumcised men and ate with them!" And Peter kind of shrugs and says later on, "Yeah, but who was I to think that I could oppose God?" And all those brand, new budding Christian theologians sort of blinked, looked at each other, shrugged and said, "Looks like we're not in charge of God's mission after all. Apparently, He wants to save other people besides Jews. Who would have 'thunk' it?"

At the end of the day, what matters most is not what strategies Karl Road Baptist Church comes up with or what resources we have or what decisions our leaders make. What matters is when the Holy Spirit says, "Here's what I want you to do, Karl Road Baptist Church, to share Jesus with and in the Northland community" and then we step out in faith and obey. "This church has ten years." I believe that means God's in charge and we better do what He wants us to do when He wants to do it or He'll go and find someone else to accomplish His mission. God is a missionary God. As a result, He sends Himself. As a result, He sends His Church. But, let's take this one step further. Because God is a missionary God...

### **GOD SENDS YOU AND ME.**

Don't forget to bring all this right down to the personal, to the individual, to you and to me. The Bible is full of stories of how God sent individuals to accomplish His mission. He called and sent Abraham. He called and sent Moses. He called and sent the prophets. He called and sent Paul. He called and sent Peter to go to Cornelius' home. Here it is in black and white. "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! ... And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors...." ( 2 Cor 5:17-20 NLT)

What is the mark of a real follower of Jesus? How do you know if someone is truly a Christian? I'm becoming more and more convinced that it has to do with this whole understanding that you are sent by God and you want to be sent by God. If you have no interest in God's mission – it's just all about you getting to Heaven when you die and walking the streets of gold – how can you think the Spirit of God truly lives in you? It's not about having all your doctrine correct; it's not even about knowing the Bible from cover to cover; it's not about being a really, good moral person; it's not about just coming to church and being a "pew potato." It's about being willing to be sent by God as an instrument of His mission. God sends you into your family. God sends you into your school. God sends you into your workplace. God sends you into your neighborhood.

Because God is a missionary God and He loves the lost people in your circles of influence, He wants to use you as His instrument of mission.

Some years ago now, an organization called the Church Growth Institute, published some interesting statistics that stand the test of time. I've never read or heard anything since that contradicts these statistics. The Church Growth Institute asked this question, "Why do people first come to church and/or receive Jesus as Savior?" Here's what they found. Special Need – 1-2%; Walk In – 2-3%; Visitation – 1-2%; Church Program – 1%; Sunday School – 4-5%; Mass Evangelism - 0.5%; Pastor/Staff – 1-6%; Friend or Relative – 75-90%. God works in and through relationships – one on one friendships. God works through individuals to bring other individuals to a saving knowledge of Jesus.

What does that suggest to me? Our church will become more effective in reaching the Northland community to the extent that we are willing to get personally involved in the lives of Northland residents. God can do this in multiple ways. If you live in Northland, it becomes just a natural expression of your everyday life. If you live outside of the Northland area, let God use you fully in your circles of influence even if those aren't in Northland. By the same token, as you do ministry in and through our church, look for ways to connect with people personally who live in the Northland area. When visitors come to church on Sunday, connect with them. You take the initiative, because God is sending you. When children show up for our programming, see if there are ways to connect with their families. You take the initiative, because God is sending you. Because God is a missionary God, He wants to send you and me. And if you want to be sent, God will most definitely send you.

A man by the name of Bill White tells this story. During a Saturday afternoon community service day – kind of like the couple of "The Church Has Left the Building" events we've had here at our church - Bill was walking down a narrow side street in the city of Compton, California, heading towards one of the worksites sponsored by his church. It was towards the end of the work day, and dozens of yellow-shirted church volunteers—maybe 50 in all—were streaming out of the site, getting ready to head off to lunch after finishing a complete makeover of a local house. Bill was six or eight houses away when he passed a married couple working in their own yard. He paused to compliment the woman on her roses, and she asked Bill what all these people were doing down the street. Bill replied that they represented a band of churches united in their desire to serve the city. Then he continued chatting about the radical neighborhood transformation this woman had witnessed by the simple acts of goodness done by these different church members. During this conversation with this woman, her husband had been weed-whacking the other side of the front yard. But when he saw Bill's yellow "volunteer shirt," he turned off his weed-whacker, set it down, and started walking straight towards Bill and his wife. Bill says he'll never forget his words. After looking into Bill's eyes, he nodded approvingly towards the renovated house down the street and then said, "I love your heart. Where can I

get a heart like yours?" Flabbergasted, Bill simply said, "We got our hearts from Jesus, and He would be glad to give you one like His, too." Bill ended up having a great conversation about the unparalleled gospel of Jesus Christ and His power to change hearts, homes, neighborhoods and cities.

Bill was willing to be sent. Are you? Am I? We worship and serve a missionary God. And because He's a missionary God, He sends Himself. He sends His Church. And He sends you and me. I want to close this morning with an experience that happened to the prophet Isaiah. You can find it in chapter six of his prophecy. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.' Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" May that be our response when God sends us: "Here am I, Lord. Send me!"