

THE E IN ROPES: WHAT HAVE WE GOT TO TELL?

PSALM 96

This fall we offered a two part seminar entitled “Overcoming Evangeophobia.” The seminar’s title was a tongue-in-cheek recognition that many followers of Jesus are truly afraid of sharing their faith with someone who doesn’t acknowledge Jesus as Savior and Lord. Afraid of what? Afraid of being rejected. Afraid of being thought weird. Afraid of sharing wrong information about Jesus. Afraid of being considered a religious fanatic. Afraid of being asked a question they can’t answer and looking dumb. In addition, we often associate words like “evangelism,” “missions,” and even “outreach” with bizarre activities or practices. Like Brother Louie in Garrison Keillor’s hilarious book “Lake Wobegon Days.” Keillor’s book is a fictional account of what it was like to grow up in a small Minnesota town called Lake Wobegon in the middle of the 20th century. He shared how Brother Louie – a fictional, well-meaning believer – went about sharing his faith with others.

“Brother Louie’s car was a rolling display of Scripture truth, equipped not only with verses on the license plates but also across the dashboard, both sun visors, the back of the front seat, all four armrests, the rubber floor mats, the ashtray and glove compartment, and just in case you weren’t paying attention, he had painted a verse across the bottom of the passenger side of the windshield – ‘The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord’ – for your edification as you gazed at the scenery. Brother Louie kept a plastic bucket by his left leg, where he kept Gospel tracts, rolled up and wrapped in a bright cellophane, which he tossed out at mailboxes as he drove along. The cellophane was to protect the Word from rain and also to attract the eye. And finally, one year, he found a company in Indiana that advertised custom-made musical horns. Louie’s horn played the first eight notes of the Doxology. It sounded like a trumpet. He blew it at pedestrians, oncoming traffic while passing, and sometimes just for his own pleasure. On occasion, vexed by a fellow driver, he gave in to wrath and leaned on the horn, only to hear, ‘Praise God from Whom all blessings flow.’ It calmed him down right away.” Truth be told, I think many of us associate such weirdness with evangelism.

Every now and then I put together a message on the KRBC picture of a disciple – a follower of Jesus. It’s the acronym ROPES. Being a disciple is all about relationships – first with God and then with other people. It’s also all about obedience. Being a disciple is more than just believing certain doctrines; it’s about steady life transformation. Prayer is something disciples of Jesus do with intentionality. The foundation of everything we do as disciples is Scripture. What the Bible says, God says. And just before Scripture is the E word: evangelism. That’s what I want us to focus in on this morning.

If evangelism includes telling other people about God and what He’s done for us, here’s an obvious question: “What have we got to tell?” Some of the answers to that question are found in Psalm 96. It might seem strange to look to an Old Testament text to help us understand evangelism. But the fact is that the Old Testament people of God – the Jews – knew their God was bigger than just their own nation. They recognized their God was the one and only true God and all other deities were false. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah were eager for all the nations of the world to acknowledge the God

of Israel as the one, true God and bow in worship before Him. That's really the same goal you and I have today. We want anyone and everyone to acknowledge what Jesus said – that He alone is the way, the truth, and the life. We accept as absolute truth Jesus' own conclusion that no one has a relationship with God unless he or she comes through Jesus Himself. So, let's get familiar with Psalm 96 and see in what ways it helps us answer the question, "What have we got to tell?" I hope you noticed how often God's people are encouraged there to share with the rest of the world their experience of God. For example, we are encouraged to...

DECLARE HIS GLORY.

In v. 3 (NIV), we're told to, "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples." I like how the Message version of the Bible renders that same verse, "Take the news of his glory to the lost, news of his wonders to one and all!" (Ps. 96:3 MSG) We've discussed that word "glory" in other messages. Throughout the Bible it refers to a person's inner character. It points to whatever gives a person substance, value, weight, clout, and significance. That's a person's glory. When it's talking about God, then, glory means both what God is like and what God has done.

Whoever wrote Psalm 96 – the author is anonymous – went on to suggest we discover something of God's glory by learning how He has revealed Himself in history. Truly, God has done some amazing stuff! The Jewish people had a well-developed sense of how God had acted at specific times in specific ways with specific people either to demonstrate His own greatness or to rescue His people from danger and death. For example, God called Abraham, the original ancestor of the Jewish people, out of a life of paganism to put his trust in the one, true God. God allowed Abraham's wife, Sarah, to conceive supernaturally and give birth to Isaac. Then there was the Exodus event under Moses' leadership and the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. God's people were given and then brought into the promised land of Canaan by God Himself. What was the message? God was alive, active, and powerful. He was anything but remote and disinterested in human beings. He was vitally involved in the lives of His people and through them – the Jewish people – He intended to bless all people.

The Bible goes on to teach us that God perfectly and ultimately revealed Himself in His Son, Jesus. Jesus is not some mythological superhero like Superman or Batman. Jesus actually entered into human history some 2,000 years ago. He wasn't a ghost or a figment of the disciples' imagination. Jesus was and is a real Person in time, space, and history. He really lived. He really died on a cross. He really rose again from the dead. Why is Jesus without a doubt the most influential human being who's ever lived? Because He really exists and what He accomplished changed the world forever.

When we declare something of God's glory to other people, we will end up getting to the cross and the empty tomb sooner rather than later. What happened there was and is truly glorious, marvelous, and wonderful. Because of the cross and the empty tomb, we can tell people God is holy and just. He's never overlooked the presence of evil in this world or excused the fact of human sin. But He's the only One who's actually

addressed it effectively. When Jesus died on the cross, God Himself paid the debt sin and evil created. Sin and evil deserve punishment and God took His own punishment in Jesus. Because of that act, God can now forgive our sin and restore our relationship with Him. Because of the cross and the empty tomb, we can tell people God is faithful and reliable. Right at the beginning of human history, shortly after Adam and Eve committed the first sin, God promised to send a Savior. Then, throughout the Old Testament, God reaffirmed the promise of a Savior through the words of the prophets. But perhaps most wonderful of all is the fact that because of the cross and the empty tomb, we can tell people God is full of love and grace. The Bible says, "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Rom. 5:8 NLT) If someone asks you for proof of God's love just point to the cross of Jesus! Whenever you have the privilege of getting into a faith conversation with someone, try to get to the cross and the empty tomb as quickly as possible. Declare God's glory at any and every opportunity! That's what you and I have to tell!

Now, the cross and the empty tomb are the big story we have to tell. But there's also the little story that's very important, too. The little story is your personal story. In other words, what has God done for you and in you, personally? That, too, is part of what you and I have to tell. Did God forgive your sin? Did God give you a new purpose or bring new meaning into your life? Did God do something wonderful in your life – perhaps rescue you from an addiction, or heal your body, or sustain you through some great trial or difficulty? How has knowing God and having Jesus be your Lord and Savior impacted your life? One reason many Christians succumb to personal evangeophobia is because they think they have to remember God's story perfectly. What if they get some fact about Jesus wrong? What if they don't explain something perfectly theologically? Better just leave that evangelism stuff to pastors and professional missionaries, they think. But you can't get your own story wrong! Nobody can really challenge how you've experienced God and how He's impacted your life. The most convincing story you have to tell is what God has done for you. It's an essential part of what we have to tell!

When Robert Louis Stevenson, the author, was a child, he was watching a lamplighter at work one evening. This was before electric lights. Young Robert stood at the window and saw the man moving down the street lighting streetlamps one by one. His nanny suspected he'd gotten into mischief because he'd been so quiet for so long. What was he doing? Robert replied, "I'm watching a man punch holes in the darkness." Jesus said He was the light of the world. He also said His followers are the light of the world. That means we have the privilege and responsibility to punch holes in the spiritual darkness so that people can see Jesus and find their way to Him.

Don't let anyone suggest to you that you're inadequate to declare God's glory. God has placed you within a family, at a job, in a neighborhood, or at a school so that right there in that place you can declare God's glory. Right there you can tell others what God has done for you and what He means to you. Right there you can punch some holes in the darkness. God calls every follower of Jesus to declare His glory in every place and at every opportunity. Psalm 96 also encourages us to...

DECLARE HIS KINGDOM.

Down in v. 10 (NLT), we're told to, "Tell all the nations, 'The LORD reigns!'" Again, I appreciate how the Message has rendered the same verse, "Get out the message— GOD Rules!" (Ps. 96:10 MSG) We Americans have no current experience with kings, queens, or monarchies. We might be fascinated with the British royal family, but they really have only symbolic power. But for most of human history, a monarchy was one person rule. A monarchy was not a democracy. A king or queen was an absolute ruler with absolute power over everyone in his or her kingdom. The language here about the Lord reigning and God ruling underlines a fact the Bible declares in many places. Only a king reigns and God is the ultimate king. He's an absolute ruler with absolute power over everyone. We might live in a democracy called the United States of America, but we live in a world – no, make that a universe – that's a Kingdom with only one King, God Himself. Jesus spoke often about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is bigger than the universe and yet as small as your heart and mine. Observe with me, too, that the verb here is in the present tense. It doesn't say here that the Lord did reign or the Lord will reign, or that God did rule or God will rule. No, it says the Lord reigns and God rules. Present tense. Right now. Even though events around our country and around the world might cause us to question it from time to time, the Bible tells us God is in full control of His Kingdom just as He was yesterday and just as He will be tomorrow. He will never abdicate, resign, or step down as King of His Kingdom.

OK, but how can you and I declare God's Kingdom in practical, effective ways? One way is to live out our own lives as if no part of this world, human society, or culture is exempt from the control of the King. We live in a culture that wants to keep God – and anything to do with God – out of most parts of life and living. Sure, you can think about God and engage in God talk here in a building devoted to religion, but just about anywhere else is thought to be highly inappropriate. We've been told it's a good thing to keep God out of education. We've been told it's a good thing to keep God out of politics or government. We've been told God has no place in business. We've been told God should not factor into lifestyle choices such as abortion, or sexual orientation, or marriage, being a racist, or taking advantage of the poor. Now, let's be very careful and thoughtful how we go about declaring God's Kingdom. I don't think it means winning "the culture wars." I don't think it means getting control of the government by electing the right people or getting the right judges appointed. I don't think it means imposing or forcing people to think or act like Christians when they can't and they won't.

Well, then, how do we do it? How do we declare His Kingdom? If God is King and if the Lord reigns, then that fact should be reflected in the personal lives of His people above all. That's the single best way to declare God's Kingdom. It's not by joining some mass movement of fellow Christians to make America godly again. It's not by getting lost people to conform to our perspective against their will, but instead showing them by our lives – one to one - what it means to live every day under the gracious kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ. Is God truly the ruler of your life? Does He reign on the throne of your life? Is He sovereign over how you spend your time, how you spend your money, or how you treat your spouse? Do you treat other people as if each one is

truly made in the image of your King? Do you look for opportunities to move people a step closer to the King and His Kingdom? How? By praying for them. By intentionally seeking to build a friendship with them. By having faith conversations with them. By inviting them to great events like our “Believe in Christmas” concert. Sure, invite your Christian friends to come. But join me in asking the Lord to lead us to some receptive non-believers we can invite to the event. Do people look at our lives – our decisions, our lifestyles, our choices, our priorities, our relationships – and observe God’s kingship of grace and His reign of love? If we declare, “The Lord reigns!” and “God rules!,” people will only begin believing it if they can see how God’s reign and rule reveals itself in your life and mine. What do we have to tell? Declare His glory. Declare His Kingdom. We’re also encouraged to...

DECLARE HIS JUDGMENT.

In v. 13 (NIV), the psalmist says, “Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.” Do you know what sounds a little jarring to me when I read that verse for the first time? It’s joy and celebration over God’s judgment. I don’t know about you, but whenever I think of the judgment of God it doesn’t provoke feelings of joy within me. Instead I feel dread. That’s because I often equate the word “judgment” with punishment or condemnation. But in the Bible, the word judgment has a much broader definition. Because God is loving, just, and good, we can trust Him to right every wrong one day and establish eternal peace and harmony. On the one hand, no evil will go unpunished. No crime will escape God’s justice. On the other hand, every act of goodness and righteousness will be rewarded. Every act of love will be honored. So judgement – God’s judgment – will be both terrible and wonderful all at the same time.

Al Gore entitled his movie about global warming, “An Inconvenient Truth.” Well, there’s no more inconvenient truth than the eternal destination of people who reject Jesus. The Bible suggests that people judge themselves before God on the basis of what they do with Jesus. If they recognize and acknowledge Jesus for who He is and for what He’s done – receiving Him into their lives as Savior and Lord – God forgives their sin and opens wide the door of Heaven to them forever. But if people decide Jesus was little more than just a noble man who got some really tough breaks in life – a good man, but someone who can be safely ignored – then God grants them exactly what they wish – an eternity of separation from Himself. The Bible calls it Hell. If that’s the truth, then there’s no good excuse not to tell them the truth. Everyone deserves to know the truth. No, we don’t bludgeon people with this news like it’s a weapon. Instead, the Bible says, “If someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way.” (1 Pt. 3:15-16 NLT) Yes, there will be times when we must let people know that their choice regarding Jesus has eternal consequences. Human beings resist the finality of that choice, but it’s true and real, nonetheless.

W.C. Fields was a famous entertainer and comedian about a hundred years ago. He was a lifelong agnostic when it came to spiritual matters. It’s reported that during his last illness a longtime friend made a visit and saw that Fields was reading a Bible. “It’s

good to see that you've changed," said his friend. To which Fields replied, "I haven't changed. I'm looking for loopholes." When it comes to getting into Heaven, sadly, many people seek loopholes in the Bible's very clear message.

Do you believe in loopholes when it comes to Jesus? Do you really believe that unless your own children and grandchildren personally receive Jesus as Lord and Savior, they will be lost eternally? Do we really believe our family members will be judged by a different standard than anyone else? What about your neighbor next door, your co-worker in the next office, your fellow student at the next desk? Part and parcel of what we have to tell is the responsibility to inform others that a choice about Jesus needs to be made and that choice has eternal consequences. It's not about forcing our faith on anyone. It's about telling them the truth. Of course, share that hard truth as sensitively as possible. Begin by praying for someone specifically today. "Dear God, please give me the opportunity of telling - George, Mary, Jack, Susan - about Jesus. If not me, please, Lord, send someone else. Someone needs to tell them they need to make a choice and that their choice has eternal consequences. I'm willing to be that person."

Penn Jillette is one half of Penn and Teller, a duo that has been headlining Las Vegas shows for years with comedy and the art of illusion. Penn Jillette is an atheist. He's never been shy about his disbelief in God, often writing about it in articles and best-selling books. Yet in an on-line video blog that can be found on YouTube, Penn shares a story about the time a gracious Christian businessman gave him a Bible as a gift. Penn goes on to use the story as an opportunity to point out that Christians who don't evangelize must really hate people. Here's the quote from his video blog:

"I've always said that I don't respect people who do not proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that, well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward - and atheists who think that people shouldn't proselytize, [saying] 'Just leave me alone and keep your religion to yourself' - how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize them? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed beyond the shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming to hit you, and you didn't believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there's a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that."

Yes, it is, Penn Jillette. Indeed it is. Thank you for reminding us. And it comes from an atheist not a fellow disciple of Jesus. What have we got to tell? Declare His glory. Declare His Kingdom. And, yes, declare even His judgment. It's all a part of being a follower of Jesus – a disciple.