

The Mission of the 72

“I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. ¹⁹ Indeed, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will hurt you.”

That’s some pretty heady stuff. What does it actually mean when Jesus said he saw Satan fall from heaven?

It’s a vision of the end of this age when Satan is finally and for all time defeated. The outcome of the mission of the 72 foreshadows that defeat. And what’s more, the disciples are the ones Jesus uses to defeat Satan!

Not through weapons of conquest, but through the sharing of peace, through healing, through confronting demons and casting them out...and through proclamation of God’s reign of peace and love.

Imagine it! Those 72 followers of Jesus, stepping out with really nothing, completely dependent on the hospitality of those they encounter. Going out like lambs among the wolves that would like to devour them.

They go out and engage the communities. They extend peace. They wade in where sickness stunts and destroys life. They confront the demons of the time. And they tell the people that a new world is being born – a world ruled by God – a world of peace and blessing for all creation. A world that Jesus himself has brought and is bringing to fulfillment.

And all that is enough to defeat the cosmic ruler of evil. Remarkable!

The power comes from Jesus, but the laborers are the disciples.

When they return to Jesus and report, they are clearly very excited. I would be too!

But here’s what I think is really cool...Jesus calls us to the same task – to go out and bring healing, to confront demons, and to proclaim that with Jesus’ coming, a new more loving world has been born. And we’re called to demonstrate that way of life to the rest of the world.

Think about it! Our names could be written in heaven as ones who did the work of Jesus.

But even today we go out as lambs among the wolves. For whatever reason – human sin I guess – there is much resistance to Jesus’ actual message. And Christians have not always responded the way Jesus instructed here.

Jesus' instructions say that the first thing disciples should do is extend peace to the place they enter. It appears that right off the bat there will be places where there is no person of peace. So the extension of peace will bounce off. It's like they get an error message – message not delivered, recipient not found.

And if the place doesn't receive the message, the disciples' response should be clear, but peaceful - shake off the dust and move on. Don't react angrily.

But that's hard – it was then and it is now. In the scripture we skipped, Jesus and his disciples entered a Samaritan village and tried to proclaim the message of the Kingdom of God. But the village refused to accept it. Incensed, James and John asked - “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

But Jesus rebuked them. That is not how Jesus' disciples are to respond to rejection, no matter how many times the message of God's reign of peace and blessing is rejected.

Many of us who are called to preach Jesus and the kingdom of God have really struggled this past week. Some of us can maybe even relate a little bit to James and John.

Jesus instructed his disciples to offer their peace to the places they went. Their peace – the peace that they themselves had in them from their relationship with Jesus. It was a peace that was to flow from them to others in the places they entered.

But that peace within can be hard to maintain when the wolves are snarling and snapping.

I will have to confess that as a disciple of Jesus who continuously strives, however imperfectly, to do the ministry of Jesus in the here and now, I'm not doing all that well right now.

I don't have much peace to offer. I am deeply troubled by the things that are happening very quickly in this new administration.

Ultimately, I fear none of us are going to like what's being created. But mostly I fear for those for whom it has already been frightening and damaging. People are getting hurt and if we are creating groups of people we think somehow deserve that, we have completely misunderstood Jesus and his message of God's reign.

So, for the moment, I am utterly without peace. Yet here we are. And I'm committed to preaching Jesus and the kingdom of God in a world where the values of the powerful are so often at odds with God's reign.

I'm also committed to this new thing we are starting in our shared ministry. I'm committed to working to get it off the ground and going in a fashion that could last. I'm committed to helping

create and shape our little communities of disciples so that we too can continue to carry out Jesus' mission.

Preaching Jesus and the kingdom of God is always a bit political. The gospel of the kingdom of God in the here and now is a way of being community together that can clash with our usual way of doing things.

I recognize that I serve in congregations that span the political spectrum...you are all people I love whatever your political stances. But I'm finding this a very difficult time.

However, I am not without hope. I find hope in the reminder that it is Christ's power that accomplishes his mission, not mine.

I'm reminded that Christ is the one who lets evil and death do its worst to him, then conquers it by rising from the dead.

I am reminded of the many times in scripture when God brought life from death - from Noah and the flood to Moses and the Exodus to the Exile to Babylon and return home. To the cross...and the tomb...and then the empty tomb.

I am reminded that although we are sent out as lambs among wolves, the wolves are no match for the Lamb of God.

I am reminded that, whether the message is accepted or not, the kingdom of God has come near. In fact it is here, in part now but it will one day be our entire reality.

I find hope that Jesus sent out the 72 and had them go in pairs. His mission is done by the community of disciples and not just by us as individuals.

So when some are worn down and tapped out and completely without peace, others can pick up and carry on until we're back.

Discipleship is not a solo gig.

And I find hope in this image – I saw Satan fall like lightening from heaven. I am reminded that in the end, the blood of the lamb, and not the prowling lion and wolves is victorious.

And in the end, no matter what our political beliefs are or who's right and who's wrong, the powers of evil will fall, and God and the Lamb will reign forever in a reign of peace and love.