

If you’ve been tracking with us the last three weeks, you know that we have been teaching through a series on one of our core values, namely, Missional Living. I’m going to wrap things up today, and next week we are going to step back into the series we began in the Fall: the Sermon on the Mount.

Next week, we’re going to do something a little bit different--we’ve invited an actor to come and preach Jesus’ *Sermon*, from memory, in first-person narrative. Craig Erickson makes his living on the stage and has performed in many productions at Bard on the Beach, the Arts Club, and Pacific Theatre--he’s also a sessional teacher at Trinity Western University. Craig and his family live in East Vancouver and attend Tenth Avenue Alliance Church.

Between this Sunday and next, I want to encourage all of you to do something with me--sit down and read through Jesus’ *Sermon*, Matthew 5-7; it won’t take you more than 15-20 minutes. For those of you who have committed to read the Scripture for 15 minutes a day, 4 times a week, consider reading through Jesus’ *Sermon* 4 times this week. If you do, your mind and heart will be primed and ready when Craig comes.

The Winter Olympics begin this week: how many of you are excited? Over the last few weeks, the CBC has been broadcasting Olympic stories of perseverance, overcoming impossible odds, and the dream of winning gold.

It brings back so many memories of our 2010 Games. Do you remember what it felt like in our city? Alexandre Bilodeau winning the first Canadian gold medal on our own soil. North Vancouver’s Maelle Ricker, wins gold in snowboarding. Sidney Crosby scores the

golden goal to seal the men’s hockey victory. I get emotional just thinking about it--what I feel is intense pride, I’m proud to be Canadian.

If you were to cut me, I would bleed maple-leaf-red, but, my primary identity is not bound to my nationality--my primary identity is caught up with the Lord Jesus Christ. I am a Christian; I have decided to follow Jesus in thought, word, and deed--where He goes, I must go. And it seems to me, in many respects, my God and my country are moving in two very different directions. Do you feel this tension?

We are a pluralistic nation: we have many different sets of competing values, worldviews, and beliefs. In our culture, the chosen strategy to maximize the “greatest good,” or maintain the greatest possible harmony, is to prioritize the value of tolerance. We are all entitled to our own opinions, but we are encouraged to keep our opinions to our selves.

Capital “T” truth has been downgraded to something more inclusive--you can have your “truth” and I can have mine. Now of course there is a logical absurdity about it all--two opposing statements cannot both be “true” in any meaningful sense. But this is the country in which we live; this is the culture in which we have been called to bear witness to Jesus, the One who described Himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And the question many are asking is, “*can the gospel survive in this present, pluralistic, culture?*”

I believe it can do more than survive--it can thrive. **The gospel still “works;” the gospel is still the power of God for salvation.** Yes, our culture is resistant to the good news concerning Jesus, but adopting a doomsday perspective gives our culture too much credit,

and God too little. Our God is great, loving, and strong. Our God is a God who saves. *The gospel still “works,” but in a changing world, we need to change our approach.*

illus: in 1989, in Manila, a conference was held on world evangelization. One of the conference speakers was a Chinese businessman from Hong Kong; his name was Lee Yih. The word he gave was a prophetic call to the church, but the packaging of this word caught people off guard--he began by contrasting how frogs and lizards acquire their food.

“The frog just sits and waits and lets the food come to him. As soon as an insect gets close enough, all a frog has to do is stick out its tongue and get it. If the lizard behaved in the same way, it would soon starve. It can’t afford to sit and wait. It has to go out into the world where the food can be found”.

Lee went on to suggest that many Christians are like frogs. They study the Bible, they get involved in church ministry, and they expect that somehow the people around them will know that they are in the business of meeting spiritual needs. Soon their frog-like habit of waiting for others to come to them becomes deeply ingrained.

Donna Hailson once said, “we can’t just sit in our cozy little God boxes waiting for the world to beat a path to our doors. To reach the world, the church has to break out of walls, go out of doors and lead people to the path—the narrow path that leads to life.” In other words, we need to abandon our frog-like tendencies and embrace our “inner lizard.”

In the church-wide survey we conducted last Fall, one of the most frequently named barriers to sharing our faith in Christ was the lack of opportunity. But I wonder, are we lacking opportunity, or are we overlooking the opportunity around us? Perhaps we are acting too much like frogs--we are waiting for people to approach us, asking, *what must I do to be saved?*

illus: Two Sundays ago, I woke up early and decided to go for a run. As I ran through our neighbourhood I began to pray prayers of thanksgiving--I see God’s goodness everywhere I go. I began to pray prayers of surrender--*Father, may Your name be honoured, may Your Kingdom plans, may Your will be done in my life, in my family, in our church, in our city.*

I made my way through our neighbourhood and made a split second decision to run down to Windsor High School and put in a few laps around the track. On lap #2, I noticed a coach on the field, getting things ready for the upcoming soccer game. I knew this man--his daughter and my son are in the same class at school. I knew that he and his wife have recently separated, I knew that he loves his family, I knew that this must be tearing him apart.

And so I abandoned lap #3 and began a conversation with him. I asked him how he was doing, and he began to share his pain. We talked about parenting, marriage, and reconciliation; we also talked about God. He told me that he feels lost these days and that he hoped that “the Big Guy up there” could hear what he is praying. And I assured him, “*Oh, He hears you, He knows you, He loves you.*” I told him I would be praying for him too.

I drove to church that morning thinking about Acts 17:26-27. It says, *“From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and [God] marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us.”*

God is not far from anyone. He’s certainly not far from my friend-- God lives in our neighbourhood, in me. I don’t live where I live by accident--I was born to Canadian parents. God led me into pastoral ministry, which put me in connection with Brian Buhler--the former pastor of this church. And Brian set me up on a blind date with a young women from this church: Naomi and I met, fell in love, and got married. Seven years later, we moved to the North Shore so that I could attend graduate school in Vancouver, and before I was finished I was hired by this church.

We put down roots in the Seymour Heights area, our kids attend the public school, and their friends live in the neighbourhood all around us. When I drop my kids off at school I rub shoulders with the other parents who share the same stage of life, and many of the same concerns, interests, and passions. It’s not a coincidence that God has placed us where He has.

So when I get up early on a Sunday morning, put on my running shoes, pray my way through our neighbourhood, and run down to the Windsor track, I’m not thinking about mission--but God is. I never run on Sunday mornings, there’s no reason for me to be running laps around a high school track, but there I am and the Spirit of God whispers, *Mark, I care about that man...go talk to him.*

God is orchestrating events, encounters, and relationships so that people will seek Him, so that they will know that God is not far from any one of us. And while I don’t always see the opportunities around me, God sees, God knows, and He’s arranging these encounters so that people who don’t know Jesus, will know that Jesus knows all about them.

All of us are on mission with God. Our mission field will likely be connected to where we live, where we go to school, where we work-- God wants to reach the people we already know. God can use you and me because there is an “inner lizard” inside every one of us-- church, it’s time to let the lizard out.

Let me encourage to take your Bible and turn with me to 2 Timothy; if you are using the blue bibles from the seat rack, you can find our text on page 1853.

Before I begin reading, I want to set the context a little. I want to remind you that what we’re about to read is a letter, a personal letter written by Paul to Timothy. Paul was in prison, living on borrowed time; he knew he had a date with the executioner.

Paul had seen it all in his ministry. He had travelled back and forth across Asia Minor. He had planted churches. He had been beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, and imprisoned for his witness to Jesus. Paul had been faithful. And as he thought about his life coming to an end, there were a few, final, things that he wanted to communicate to Timothy. Timothy was like a son to Paul. He was a young pastor, sent by Paul to Ephesus; Timothy was giving guidance to a small, fledging church.

Paul knew that he had sent Timothy into the mouth of the lion’s den; Ephesus was no dream assignment. The last time Paul had been in Ephesus, talking about Jesus had caused a riot--he had to run for his life. Ephesus has been referred to as the Vegas of the ancient world; it was known for its wealth, for its pleasures, and for its worship of the goddess Artemis, complete with ritual prostitution.

Can you imagine Timothy trying to attract new converts? *Hey why don't you come by the church tonight? We're talking about self-denial and suffering--it's going to be awesome!* How often did Timothy see eyes glaze over? *So Tim, what you're telling me is that if I come to your meeting, I can learn about self-denial, but, if I swing by the temple tonight, I can have sex with one of the prostitutes...hmmm...that's a tough choice.*

Jesus has a lot of competition doesn't He? He's competing against every other pursuit, drug, desire, pleasure, and worldview. Paul knew what Timothy was up against and so he penned a letter to offer some encouragement: *it's worth it Timothy, it's the only life worth living, Jesus is the only One worth following...they may be selling sex, but Jesus is offering life.*

Let's read a part of Paul's letter, beginning in chapter 1, verse 8.
8 *So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.*

9 *He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,*
10 *but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior,*

Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald

This word, “gospel,” is an important one in the Scriptures. You don't have to hang around church very long before someone is going to use the word “gospel.” What does it mean? In the Scriptures, this word is used in 4 different ways.

1. In the ancient world, the word “gospel” wasn't a religious word, it was an everyday word that meant “**good news**”. And so if your buddy scored two tickets to the sold out chariot race he might send you a one-word-text that reads: “*gospel.*” *Good news...I got two tickets!* But Christians grabbed a hold of this word, “gospel,” and began to use it exclusively concerning Jesus Christ.
2. Second, **this word “gospel” is also used of** the first four books of the New Testament: **Matthew/Mark/Luke/John**. Each of these men, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote a historical record of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This “good news” concerning Jesus was written down, and has been faithfully preserved throughout the centuries. But there's a third use...
3. When Paul used the word “gospel,” he was talking about the **salvation** God offers **through the death and resurrection of Jesus**. When Paul used the word “gospel” he was talking about sin being dealt with, death being defeated, forgiveness being offered, and people being reconciled to God. In Romans 1:16, Paul writes “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes*”. This is good news.

And there’s one more way the word “gospel” is used and it’s most frequently used this way by Jesus--Jesus talked about “*the good news of the kingdom.*”

4. This is the most expansive use of the word. Listen to Jesus define the good news in Mark 1:15, “*The time has come,*” [Jesus] *said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”*

When Jesus taught about this good news, He wasn’t teaching about His upcoming death and resurrection. Jesus was announcing the good news of the kingdom--that He had come as both Lord and King, to inaugurate God’s reign on the earth. God the Son took on our flesh and blood, He was born to Mary and was given the name Jesus. His name, Jesus (Yeshua), means *The Lord Saves*.

Jesus came to set in motion a plan, God’s plan, to put back to rights everything that has become twisted, broken, and diseased in our world. Broken bodies, unreconciled relationships, corrupt governments, war-torn countries, sickness, pain, and death--all of these will be done away with; this is the end-game of the kingdom.

We seek the momentary pleasures of a new purchase, a new relationship, a new job, success, or adventure--but how long does any of it last? How long will we chase after what will never satisfy? Jesus says, *Come to Me with your weariness and your burdens, and I will give you real rest.* This is the good news of the Kingdom. This news is worth living for, worth dying for, it’s worth sharing with others--it’s the best news there is.

Let’s get back to Paul’s words to Timothy. Vs. 9, “*He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time*”.

We need to be saved, every one of us, because all of us have sinned, all of us have missed God’s mark for our lives, all of us are separated from God. The good news is that God the Father sent God the Son on a rescue mission--Jesus came to save us. The really good news is that this salvation isn’t something we need to earn, attain, or work for; salvation is not dependent on how holy we can make ourselves--if it were, we’d all be disqualified.

“*He saved us...not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.*” This is the overwhelming message of the New Testament: God offers salvation because He is gracious, loving, and merciful. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus endured the cross because of the “*joy set before Him*”--the thought of spending eternity with us was enough for Jesus to willingly die in our place.

John 3:16 tells us that “*God so loved the world that He sent His Son.*” Romans 5:8 tells us that “*while we were yet sinners*”--enemies of God--“*Christ died for us.*” Romans 6:23 tells us that the just payment for our sin is death, but, “*the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*” We cannot earn so great a salvation, it must be freely given.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.*” If you think about it, it’s a ridiculous offer on God’s part. Throughout history, humanity has

repeatedly rejected God and when God the Son took on our flesh and blood, humanity conspired to kill the very One who had come to save us.

John Stackhouse writes, “God raised Jesus from the dead but instead of then launching a global attack on those who had shown themselves utterly against God’s saving purposes (= everyone), God nonetheless offers us salvation anyway through that very One we rejected.” Isn’t that incredible?!

At the heart of the “good news” is this word “grace”--the undeserved mercy of God. Grace means that we don’t get what we deserve--we get much, much better. We get the best of God and we give Him the worst of us.

In vs. 9, Paul said to Timothy, “*This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.*” Before you were born, before your parents were born, before there was a Vancouver, before Canada, before the first civilization came into being, before the sun, moon, and stars, before time itself--God had a plan that included Jesus dying to rescue you.

Ephesians 1:4-5 says, “*4 Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. 5 God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.*” Now that is a thought worth pondering--God chooses to save us because we give Him pleasure. I want to dare you this morning to take God at His word: *you give God pleasure.* His pleasure in you isn’t based on your performance; you being you is enough.

Timothy, whatever you do, don’t forget to tell people that “*This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*”

There’s this word “gospel” again--it’s connected to the saving work of Jesus--but in vs. 10, Paul fills out the picture. Jesus bore the weight of our sin on the cross, and more, He destroyed death, He has brought resurrection life into the now and offers eternal life that will never end. Death is still our enemy, but it no longer a threat to those who are in Christ. Our future is secure, eternity has been guaranteed--we need not fear death, because it could not hold Jesus, and it will not hold anyone who puts their faith in Him.

In vs. 11, Paul writes, “*Of this gospel [good news], I was appointed a herald*”. Paul, like billions of Christians since, experienced this good news firsthand when he encountered the gracious love and forgiveness of Jesus--he was never the same. This good news was in his heart and on his lips wherever he went.

Not long after Paul penned this letter, his life was taken from him. But in this letter we see Paul’s deep affection for Timothy, and, his passionate commitment to spreading the good news concerning Jesus. Let me paraphrase his closing words to Timothy, found in chapter 4:5-8.

Timothy, keep your head about you, don’t be afraid to suffer for your faith in Jesus, and do all you can to tell others about the good news you’ve found in Him.

My life is passing away, the end is near; I can feel it it coming, but Timothy, it's all been worth it! I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. I can almost taste what is coming...the approval of God, a victor's crown, life without end. It's waiting for you too Timothy, don't forget who you're living for.

Paul writes, *Of this gospel [good news], I was appointed a herald*'.

Conclusion: As I draw my sermon to a close this morning, I want to return to the dual image of frog vs. lizard. Which image best describes you? Which image best describes our church?

We need to abandon our frog-like tendencies and embrace our “inner lizard.” All of us are on mission with God; we are all heralds of this good news. Our mission field will likely be connected to where we live, where we go to school, where we work--God wants to reach the people we already know. God can use you and me because there is an “inner lizard” inside every one of us--church, it's time to let the lizard out.

Pray: *invite people to respond to the gospel.*