

At some point this morning, you woke up and decided that you were going to attend a church service; the question is: *are you in the right church?* How do you know if you're in the "right" church? The same way you know whether you're on the "right" bus--you need to know where the bus is taking you.

A church's vision and values matter; they speak to where you are going and how you're going to get there. This morning I'm going to preach a part of our vision, a part of God's vision for every church. If you're a guest or newcomer among us, what you hear this morning will let you know where this bus is going.

We believe that at a certain point in human history, God the Son, Jesus, took on our flesh and blood and moved *into the neighbourhood*. What would cause God to do such a thing? Love. God so loved our world, so loved humanity, a humanity that was separated from Him because of sin, that He sent His Son, Jesus, to become one of us, to deal with our sin on the cross, so that we might be forgiven, and restored to relationship.

What I've just described is sometimes called the *Missio Dei*--the mission of God. And we believe that just as the Father sent the Son, we too have been personally sent, on mission, in this world. By the grace of God, it is our intent to go into our neighborhoods and around the world to express the love and hope found in Jesus. This is the bus our church is on--this is where we are going.

Last week Pastor Dave began a 4 week preaching series entitled, "Missional Living," and this morning I'm going to follow in his footsteps. First, we're going to look at two texts in the book of Acts that describe the spread of Christianity, then I want to briefly deal

with one of the historic objections to the Christian faith, and finally, I will offer three suggestions that deal with one of the barriers we face in sharing our faith in Christ.

Let me encourage you to open your Bible, or fire up your Bible App; we're going to begin with Acts 8:1-4.

Last week, we read from Acts 2: the Holy Spirit descended on a small band of Jesus followers--120 in total--they took to the streets, proclaiming Jesus, and when the dust had settled, 3000 more had joined their ranks. In the weeks that followed, this group continued to grow, and grow.

So much so that they began to attract the attention of the same religious leaders that crucified Jesus. These leaders arrested Peter and John--they questioned them, beat them, and threatened them before releasing them.

But Jesus' followers didn't lock the doors and hide, they didn't bemoan the lack of free speech, or even pray for protection. They prayed for greater boldness, they prayed for God to perform more miraculous healings as a sign of Jesus' power and authority--and then they back out into their neighbourhoods to speak about Jesus, the Son of God.

When the religious leaders saw that threats and beatings weren't having the desired effect, they ramped things up a notch; they grabbed Stephen, a notable Jesus follower, and publicly executed him.

Acts 8:1-4 says, “*On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*”

Focus, just for a moment, on the last verse. “**4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.**” The Bible says that we live, and move, and have our being *in Christ*. The Bible says that when Jesus died on the cross, in a mysterious way, we died with Him and our life is now hidden with Christ in God--He is our life.¹ Everett Harrison notes that those who were scattered from their homes went out as missionaries more than refugees.² Wherever followers of Jesus go, they talk with, and about, Jesus.

In Acts 9, we come face to face with the person who was leading the great persecution against the church--Saul. But after a personal encounter with Jesus, Saul went from arresting Christians to convincing people to become Christians. Let's pick up his story in Acts 9:20.

“**20** *At once [Saul] began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those*

who call on [Jesus'] name? And hasn't [Saul] come here to take [Christians] as prisoners to the chief priests?” 22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

23 *After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, 24 but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. 25 But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.*

26 *When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus [Saul] had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.*

28 *So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. 30 When the believers learned of this, they took [Saul] down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. 31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.*

¹ Romans 6:5-6a; Colossians 3:3-4; c.f. Galatians 2:20.

² Everett Harrison, as quoted by Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts*, 263.

Saul was an unlikely team member. Saul had devoted himself to crushing Christianity, using violent force, but he did a 180 after he encountered Jesus. Just as unlikely as Saul's place on Jesus' team, was the effect of persecution on the early church: suffering didn't stamp out the Christian message, the message of Jesus spread because of it. Tertullian, a 2nd century Christian, once wrote, "kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to the dust... The more you mow us down, the more we grow--the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."³

The early church understood that following Jesus would be costly; suffering was an ever present reality. But they would tell us that Jesus was worth it; He still is.

Objections to Christianity

I want to take a few minutes to address one of the historic objections to the Christian faith, namely, *if God is good, all-powerful, and loving, why doesn't He do something about evil?* Some suggest that the existence of suffering in the world disproves the existence of God.

As some of you know, beginning on January 27th, Keith Whitaker and Daniel Klassen will be teaching a 4 week class on Monday nights--their class will address this objection and three others. In preparing to preach this morning, I asked both Daniel and Keith to send me a brief response to the objection of evil--let me offer some of their thoughts.

Some have argued that the existence of evil in the world makes it unreasonable to believe in God. They claim that a loving God would want to create a world without suffering, and an all-powerful God has the ability to create any world He wants, so, a world created by God should not have any suffering in it.

The question itself is ironic. The existence of suffering actually provides us with good reason to believe that God does exist. It goes without saying that we don't like suffering, but most people think that suffering "ought" not be. This "oughtness" is something that goes beyond our personal preferences; it implies that the world was made to be a certain way, and that suffering is a corruption of that original purpose. But a world without God doesn't have inherent purpose--how then do we explain this internal intuition?

The Bible tells us that when God created the world He declared it to be "very good," but then humanity chose the way of sin and all of creation was subjected to corruption and decay. Our instinct that suffering "ought not be" is correct and it points to the existence of God, our Creator.

Let's return to the objection: a loving God would want to create a world without suffering, and an all-powerful God has the ability to create any world He wants, so, a world created by God should not have any suffering in it. This way of thinking has a degree of logic to it, but it falls short.

It assumes that God doesn't have any reason to permit suffering to exist. It assumes that suffering could be eradicated without disrupting

³ Tertullian, as quoted by Ajith Fernando, 268.

the otherwise good world that God has made. But what would God need to do in order to eliminate much of the suffering we experience?

It seems to me that human choice would need to be entirely removed from the equation--God would need to create a world in which we were no longer free to make real choices. In this kind of world things like love, courage, sacrifice, and perseverance would simply vanish--these moral virtues are inextricably bound up with our ability to choose. Let me ask you, could a world without love, choice, or freedom be considered a good world?

The other option would be for God to create a world in which there is unlimited freedom, but without any consequences. The freedom to drink and drive without causing injury or death. The freedom to have dozens of sexual partners, without fear of sexually transmitted diseases, or without jeopardizing our ability to finally, and fully commit to one man or one woman for life. The freedom to buy whatever I want, whenever I want, without getting into debt. The freedom to eat unhealthily, without putting on weight or having an untimely heart attack. *What kind of a world would this be? And could the God who created this kind of world be considered good?*

A God who's capable of doing something about suffering but never does is cruel, but that's not the God we see in the Bible. I'll come back to this thought as we prepare gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Barriers To Christian Witness

In the time that remains, I'd like to deal with one of the barriers that prevents us from sharing the message of Jesus with people we know and love.

One of the things I appreciate about the Christian faith is it's historicity, it's longevity, it's solidity. Empires have come and gone, various philosophies or ways of understanding the world have come and gone, and yet, Christianity remains--it has stood the test of time.

When I say that Christianity has stood the test of time, what I mean to say is that the Christian faith has been tested vigorously--sometimes through intellectual debate, and sometimes through violent persecution. But neither intellectual debate, nor violent persecution have debunked or destroyed the message of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I will build my church, and not even the gates of hell will be able to stop it from advancing."⁴

When we put our faith in Christ, we aren't putting our faith in Someone (or something) that is shady or shaky. Embracing the Christian faith does not mean embracing something intellectually suspect or weak; when we stand in Christ, we stand upon a solid foundation. Empires will continue to rise and fall, philosophies will come and go, old skeptics will pass away and new skeptics will rise up to take their place, **and**, the Christian faith will continue.

Knowing this, doesn't it take the pressure off, even a little bit? It's not solely up to you, or me, or this church, to prove God's existence, or, defend God's reputation. And while we have a part to play in

⁴ Mark Peters' paraphrase of Matthew 16:18; notice that Jesus talks about the "gates of hell," meaning, the church is on the offensive, not defensive.

bearing witness to Jesus, we are not on our own--we have 2000 years of history to stand upon, and we have a few billion brothers and sisters in Christ, world-wide, who stand with us.

This a long preamble to get at one of the barriers that frequently stands in the way of us sharing our faith in Jesus. Last week Pastor Dave said that one of the findings from our church-wide survey was that 58% of you feel moderately to fully confident in explaining the good news of Jesus to someone else.

What that means is that 42% don't have this confidence, and for many of us, including many the 58%, this likely has to do with a sense of "inadequate knowledge." In fact, "**inadequate knowledge**" was named in our survey results as the second highest barrier to sharing Jesus with those who don't yet believe.

I want to suggest that this is a barrier that can be overcome, but it will require us to let go of a certain way of thinking. I want to offer three simple suggestions:

1. First, what you don't know, you can learn. I was reading a science article this week on the capacity of the human mind--it's staggering when you think about it. The brain comprises 3% of the body's weight, but uses 20% of the body's energy. Our brain never takes a holiday, not even for an hour. Even when we're asleep our brain keeps our heart pumping, our lungs breathing, and our kidneys filtering the toxins in our body.

Damage to certain parts of our brain can affect our sense of smell or touch, while other parts of our brain is responsible for feelings, memory, and self-awareness. Your brain has an amazing ability to store information.⁵

Pastor Dave never forgets a name--if he's met you once or twice, even ten years ago, he will remember you. Pastor Mardi will read something, and be able to call it to memory no matter the situation. I can't count the amount of times that I've asked Mardi a question and she will list books or articles pertaining to the very question I'm asking. It's incredible.

And Pastor Keith...I once showed him where my private candy stash was hidden, and he's never forgotten it. Seriously though, Keith too has an incredible memory for things he's read and studied--I frequently go to him when I am researching a subject. God has given us minds to be used and exercised.

I want to suggest that we are unnecessarily afraid of being asked a question about God, the Bible, or the Christian faith that we don't have an answer to. What we don't know, we can learn. We practice this in everyday circumstances of our lives, why would it be any different when it comes to our faith?

illus: Let me offer an analogy that I'd like to direct towards the students among us. Students, is it fair to say that your parents don't know everything there is to know about parenting? Do they sometimes make mistakes? Do you ever ask them questions that they don't have answers to?

⁵ <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=people-only-use-10-percent-of-brain>

Parents, would you agree that there are things about parenting that you don't know, or don't do well? In parenting, have you ever been stumped by something, not knowing how to proceed? I'm seeing heads nodding. Let me ask you, did this lack of knowing cause you to give up on parenting?

I can remember a distinct moment, the day after Luke was born, when Naomi and I walked out of the hospital with him in our arms. As I walked out of the hospital, I looked at Luke, then at Naomi, and had a small panic attack--*did I know enough to be a parent?* Nearly 11 years have passed since that day, and we're still learning. We've read some books along the way, we've observed others parents, and we've drawn upon the wisdom of many good parents who are further along than we are.

We didn't need to know all there was to know about parenting before we became parents and you don't need to know all there is to know about God, the Bible, or the Christian faith before you tell others about Jesus.

Every so often someone will say to me, "*Mark, I'll start telling others about Jesus when I know more than I do.*" Instead of worrying about what you don't know, why not be faithful in sharing what you already know about Jesus? What you don't know, you can learn.

Just for fun, I entered the question I dealt with earlier into the Google Search Engine: *if God is good, why is there suffering?* In .2 seconds, I was connected to 27.3 million responses to this question. Any question that we hear about God, the Bible, or the Christian faith is a question that has been asked many times before, and many clear,

well-reasoned answers have been given--we can draw upon the wisdom and experience of others.

The good thing about difficult questions is that it prompts us to reflect deeply on what we believe and why. In my own experience, the average person in Canadian culture is not a well-studied atheist, with brilliant philosophical arguments against the existence of God. In fact, most people have thought far less than you have about life and death, about meaning, purpose, and the reason they exist.

And every difficult question that is directed our way, is a question that the person asking needs to have their own answer for. If a person doesn't believe in God, then why do they think suffering and evil abounds? You might be surprised to discover that those who don't like the answer you give, like their own answer even less.

One more thing...when you find yourself being asked a question you don't have a good answer for, you can do what I do. Respond by saying, "*that's a really good question, and I'd like to give you a really good answer--can I get back to you next week?*" If they are genuinely seeking answers they will be more than happy to wait.

Again, what you don't know you can learn. If you would like to be more prepared to answer the questions people ask, I would commend Keith and Daniel's class to you; you can call the church office to register, or, sign up online at <http://www.nsac.bc.ca/events/challenges-to-christianity>

Here's my 2nd suggestion: **It's okay to be you.**

2. It's okay to be you. You don't need to be a professional theologian or philosopher to talk about Jesus; you can be you--you can speak about what you know.

In Acts 9, we get a window into the life of the apostle Paul--we see his passion, his conviction, and his ability to persuade others that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. But while it's interesting to read about Paul's exploits, the danger is in thinking that Paul's way is the way. The truth is, Paul's way was just that, it was Paul's way--it flowed out of who he was.

Paul was the "perfect" choice to take the gospel throughout the Roman world. He grew up in a Roman city, was a Roman citizen, and yet was schooled in the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul knew the story of God, but he also knew the language, customs, and perspectives of the people around him.

By nature, even before Paul became a Christian, he was intense, determined, and systematic; after Paul became a Christian, Jesus redirected these qualities to expand God's kingdom. Before Paul became a Christian, he taught the Old Testament Scriptures; after Paul became a Christian, he taught the same Scriptures, BUT, he pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment of all of God's promises. Paul was used by God in a way that fit with who Paul was--it will be no different with you.

The question is, "how has God made you?" You have unique experiences, passions, gifts, and abilities, all of which God has orchestrated so that, in part, you might represent Jesus to the people

around you. You don't have to be Paul, and for goodness sake, please don't try to be me--be yourself. Now by all means, if you have the mind of a theologian or philosopher, use it for the glory of God, but if you don't, you haven't been relegated to the sidelines.

Later on in Acts 9, the focus shifts from Paul to Tabitha, she too was a Christian who was spreading the message of Jesus, albeit in a very different way. In verse 36 we read that Tabitha was "always doing good and helping the poor;" Tabitha's ministry among the widows in her city was introducing women to Jesus.

Perhaps you can relate more to Tabitha than you can to Paul. Maybe you can't imagine arguing with philosophers in the public square, but, Jesus has filled you with love for people all around you--when you serve, you serve in Jesus name; when you love, you bear witness to the love Jesus has showered upon you. The whole world knows who Mother Theresa is, and they know that she loved in Jesus' name.

In John 9, we read about an encounter between Jesus and a man who had been blind from birth; Jesus healed the man, and instantly this man became the "it" story. The religious leaders peppered him with questions: *how did Jesus do it? Who do you think Jesus is? Is He a sinner? A man sent from God? A Prophet?* As you can imagine, the formerly blind man couldn't answer any of their questions, but that didn't mean he didn't "know" Jesus.

Listen to his response, "*whether [Jesus] is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!*"⁶ Perhaps you can relate more to the blind man than you can to Paul; you may never

⁶ John 9:25.

debate an atheist, but that doesn't mean you don't have a story to tell. Don't sell yourself short, intellectual knowledge is not the only, or the most important, kind of knowledge. When it comes to speaking about Jesus, personal, experiential knowledge is vital.

We don't need to talk about Jesus like He's an object to be studied, we can talk about Him as the Person He is--a Person we know. We can bear witness to Jesus simply by telling others how He has made a difference in our lives. Are you experiencing peace, joy, or purpose because of Jesus? Speak it out. Has Jesus transformed your marriage, healed your body, or reconciled your family? Speak it out. Has Jesus' generous love made you content with who are you, what you have, and what you look like? Give glory to God--speak it out!

I believe that there is a place in the public forum for brilliant, well-spoken, Christians who can intellectually defend the Christian faith; I am grateful for the men and women who fit this description--they are a gift to the church. But many more people are going to hear first hand about Jesus in school hallways, on front lawns, in office cubicles, on soccer fields, and in living rooms--these are the places we occupy every day.

Let's move on to the final suggestion,

3. Relax and remember, it's not all up to you--God is at work too :)

Sometimes we are nervous about saying anything about Jesus because we might look foolish, or worse, Jesus might look bad because of our "inadequate knowledge." The irony is that in order to

protect Jesus' reputation and honour, we may never speak of Him at all.

The reason we can press on in the face of fear is because the Holy Spirit is the Great Evangelist--He is the One who draws people towards Jesus. We may not know what to say, but He does. The Holy Spirit knows the person we are talking with, He knows everything there is to know about them--their thoughts, their feeling, their experiences, their pain. When we don't know what to say, we can pray, and ask Him to give us words, questions, knowledge, insight, and love. Never be without love.

I've heard it said that the church of God has a mission in the world, but that's not quite right. The God of mission has a church in the world--the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are on mission, and we are His chosen instruments. Let's join God in His work.

Pray

The Lord's Supper

A God who's capable of doing something about suffering but never does is cruel, but that's not the God we see in the Bible. God was so grieved by evil and suffering that the Father sent the Son on a rescue mission--Jesus came to defeat sin, suffering, and death. It was a mission that required great sacrifice--Jesus bore in His own body the full weight of humanity's sin and suffering; all of this was put to death when Jesus died on the cross.

Sin separates us from God--a separation that no one can bridge through hard work or good deeds. None of us can make ourselves

“right” before God, we need a Saviour--Jesus came to save us, to redeem us, to reconcile us to God.

The Lord’s Supper is a physical reminder that our sin has been dealt with through the death and resurrection of Jesus. His body was broken for us; His blood was shed for us. In nearly every culture, world-wide, sharing a meal is sign of fellowship. This holy meal reminds us that God invites us into fellowship; this meal is for those who have cast their life upon the mercy of Jesus, who have put their faith in what His death and resurrection has accomplished. Because Jesus died and rose again, we can be a part of God’s family: forgiven, set free, and loved beyond measure. There’s nothing for us to earn, but there is much for us to receive.

I can’t think of anything more fitting than for you to put your faith in Jesus today, perhaps for the first time. Receive the forgiveness Jesus offers. Come and be a part of His family. Embrace the love He has for you. And then come join us in this holy meal.

Invite the servers forward.