

Sermon: 3rd Sunday of Easter - Mission Festival

Text: Acts 9:15: "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles."

Theme: To carry the name of Jesus to all!

Goal: To spread the Gospel all around the world – Angola

Dear Friends,

Introduction: God has strange ways to call someone to His Kingdom... as He did with the Apostle Paul. Usually He calls through the Means of Grace: His Word and the Holy Sacraments. But sometimes He literally interferes in the life of someone to stop the way he/she is going and to give him/her a chance to listen to the Gospel and to believe in Jesus' name. We have to be aware of certain signs in our lives. Maybe God is saying: stop... think... listen to... reverse... come closer... I love you... I want you in my Kingdom...

Why is God so eager to call people to His kingdom? Because He loves us so much and because it cost a lot to God to get us back to Him. The reading from Revelation 5:9 says about Jesus: "Because You were slain, and with Your blood You purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." No one is excluded from God's plan. His only Son was offered on the cross to pay for our sins and to bring us back to God – each of us!

God left His message written for us in the Bible, so that no one shall doubt about His gracious plans for us. The Gospel for today says: "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31). And He sent His disciples to preach the Good News all around the world!

I – The 1st growth of the Christian Church

Just before Jesus went back to the Father He said to His disciples: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). And the Christian Church began to grow in Jerusalem: from a group of 120 believers when Matthias was chosen as an apostle (Acts 1:15), the church grew to about three thousand on Pentecost Day (Acts 2:41), and a little after the number of believers was counted as five thousand (Acts 4:4). “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

From Jerusalem the church spread throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1), and reached Syria: its capital Damascus, Antioch (in northern Syria, close to Aleppo) and other cities as well. (We hear these names every day in the News).

II – The 2nd growth of the Christian Church

But God had bigger plans for His church. He wanted to reach the entire world with the Good News of Jesus. And He chose a very special man to be His instrument to carry the name of Jesus before the Gentiles: Saul, better known as The Apostle Paul. Saul was one of the most prominent Pharisees of the new generation. He had good knowledge of the Old Testament, he was very well educated, and had a zeal for his religion. As a good Pharisee, he was persecuting the followers of Jesus, whom the older Pharisees had put to death. And he went even to Syria to put some of the new Christian in jail.

As I said, God had bigger plans for the growth of His church; and He had bigger plans for Saul as well. Jesus interrupted Saul’s journey to Damascus, appearing to him in a very special way. And then Jesus called one of the Christians in Damascus, Ananias, to preach the

Gospel to Saul and to baptize him. And God was very clear in His aim about Saul: “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.”

As we know from the Bible, Paul travelled more than the other Apostles to spread the Gospel all around the Roman Empire. You can read about his missionary trips in the Book of Acts. He was even called by God to go to Europe.

III – The growth of the church nowadays

Do you know where the Christian Church is growing faster nowadays? In Africa! It's declining in Europe and in America, but it's growing in Africa. The biggest Lutheran Church in the world is in Ethiopia: more than 6 million believers! - Maybe we don't see the growth of the church so much in South Africa, a Christian Country where people are established in their family churches. But in many other countries the reality is different. And this is the case in Angola. I will just share some details about the Mission Work of the Lutheran Church in Angola:

During the Civil War, some refugees in Congo came to faith in Christ through the French Lutheran Mission in Brazzaville. Jeremiah, and later his son Benjamin, were trained as pastors by Dr. Wilbert Kreis, a French missionary who had his heart in Africa. (He passed away by a heart attack last year while in a meeting in Tanzania). When the war was over, Pastor Jeremiah and his son Benjamin Nzuzi Mavungu returned to their original region in Cabinda, Angola, where they established a mission and founded a Lutheran Church: The Confessional Lutheran Church in Angola - ILCA. The city, now with more than 180.000 inhabitants, is a big slum. In spite of the natural resources in that area: diamond, petrol and timber, the ordinary people don't have any benefit from those resources.

Pastor Jeremiah and Pastor Benjamin were looking for partnership with other Lutheran Churches. They found our Brazilian Lutheran Church, and since 1998 we have been in touch. Our Concordia Seminar is sponsoring a TEE program – Theological Education by Extension there. Pastor Benjamin has sometimes been to Brazil. I have been to Angola twice to minister the TEE program to the candidates: in 2000 and in 2002. Other Brazilian pastors and professors were there as well. Two Brazilian pastors were there in November last year and they sent me the pictures I will share with you after the sermon. 27 candidates took part on the TEE program. The church has now around 500 members and six pastors; only two of them are ordained pastors.

Conclusion: When Jesus said to Peter three times: “Feed my lambs... Take care of my sheep... feed my sheep...” (Gospel for today, John 21:15-17), this means that the sheep and lambs belong to Jesus. We are His instruments to share His Gospel with all and to take care of His sheep, around us and to the end of the world. Maybe we cannot go so far as the end of the world; but we have to learn to look outside our own windows to see how many are wandering without Jesus, and we have to learn to call them to the flock; to see how many of Jesus’ sheep and lambs are going astray; we have to bring them back; and to see how many Jesus is gathering around us, so that we welcome them and make them part of our Christian family. When we celebrate our Mission Festival, the goal is to open our eyes to mission opportunities around us and in the entire world; and to warm up our hearts with love to the lost and to those whom God is calling to His family.

We will see now some pictures of the church in Angola. May the peace of the Lord be with us all. Amen.

