

The World Needs Us

Last week I mentioned in the applications at the end of my message that one of the ways to counter the negative impression of Christians or the church is to tell the stories of the wonderful good that has been brought to this world by the followers of Jesus. In the past I have referenced some of these offerings of goodness by looking through history and highlighting contributions like the rescue of abandoned infants in Rome, the founding of the Red Cross, and of nursing, hospitals, and universities, the advances in science that came because of a Christian world view that invited people to explore and understand the Creator, the impetus behind free public education and the many charitable works among the world's poor - all because followers of Jesus wanted to show His love to the world.

I've also quoted from CBC reporter Brian Stewart's speech at the 160th Convocation of Knox College in 2004, where he spoke about his many experiences in some of the world's most desperate places: famine-stricken Ethiopia, divided South Africa, El Salvador during a murderous civil war, with anti-slavery workers in South Sudan, or with Lech Walensa in a Poland trying to topple communist rule. In his speech he describes meeting Walensa alone on a stairwell as he slipped out to a Catholic Mass. One of the reporters with Stewart asked, "Are you frightened?" Walensa stopped, looking surprised at the question, then replied, "No, I am afraid of no one, and nothing, only God." And he walked out into the night, into the multiple threats against his life, against the oppressive power of the Soviet Union. From Stewart's speech:

Here in this dingy stairwell was the purest courage and conscience backed by Christian faith that I suddenly realized no force of empire or terror could ever extinguish. Years later, in Poland again, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, I watched that empire crumble away before civil rights movements that often began in dingy little church halls and basements, early gatherings the outside world never knew about, and would not have taken seriously if it had. A lot of good things start out quietly, in humble church halls.

Stewart tells some amazing stories of courage shown by Christian workers in these places and notes that, no matter where he went or how traumatic the situations that he was sent to report on, he never got to the front lines ahead of the Christians. They were always there first, serving the needs, rescuing, sacrificing, saying to the criminals and the politically motivated, "You don't harm the weakest, the poorest, without coming through us first." Another paragraph from his speech:

I witnessed so many other Church efforts. Saving children in Mozambique from life on garbage dumps; schools for illiterate ex-field hands in the slums of Brazil; the quiet comforting of runaways and addicts in a thousand asphalt city jungles; small groups of Christians visiting the lonely and mentally fragile in low-income boarding house flats ... Groups from many churches work in famine camps, feeding, saving, comforting the dying and somehow keeping everyone's morale up on the worst days.

For many years now I have been receiving a newsletter called Joel News, published out of Amsterdam. It is a collection of accounts of what God is doing through His people all over the world. Some of the stories tell of incredible miracles, others of great courage, others of how the fruit of Christian faith is changing the places - the towns and cities - where it is being made visible. So today, I want to encourage you by some of these stories, and hopefully inspire you to believe that you can be a difference-maker, too.

From Myanmar, let me tell you the story of Dano. He was raised in a Christian home by parents who were once animists. After his father died, Dano turned to God and accepted Jesus as his Savior. One day he had a vision of a vine full of grapes, fully ripe and an angel in the vision asked him to pluck the grapes and eat them. If he refused, the angel would send someone else. When he shared this vision with his pastor, they were convinced that God was calling Dano into ministry. He went to the Buddhist village chief and offered to teach the children in the village for free, though he had to accept the condition that he wasn't allowed to preach about Jesus. While he didn't preach he did teach the children short bible verses and songs about God -- and he prayed for them continually. He would wake up at 4 am and walk through the village, praying out loud, but some of the locals complained to the chief who told him not to pray any more. He continued to pray, but more quietly and he and his family fasted every Saturday. And when people in the village were sick, Dano prayed for them and many experienced healing.

They went through threats and intimidation as a family - the children were sometimes pressured to say Buddhist prayers in school. In one incident, Dano was held at gunpoint, but the gun malfunctioned and the villagers were so astonished that they left him alone.

Even though they treated him badly, the villagers would sometimes come to Dano for help. The vice chief once asked for help with his son who had been staying in the woods near a shrine for demons. His behavior and his health were going downhill fast and they asked Dano to pray for him. Dano went to the shrine, commanded the demon to leave and burned it. Then he confronted the vice chief's son, called on the name of the Lord and the demon left that young man. The villagers reported that all the evil spirits left town at that same time. The vice chief and his family, along with four other families, accepted Jesus as their Savior and soon after more of the villagers followed in faith. Now there is a church in that place and a vision to reach out to other nearby villages that don't yet know Jesus.

On June 1, Dave Eubank, an ex-US Army Special Forces soldier, who runs a Christian humanitarian organization, got a call from an Iraqi unit that was fighting ISIS on the frontlines west of Mosul. The aid team worked to rescue civilians who were trapped by ISIS fire. Among over 50 dead bodies who had been gunned down by ISIS, they had seen an Iraqi girl, still alive, but trapped in the blazing sun and over-watched by heavy ISIS firepower. When Eubank arrived, he and those with him prayed and talked with Iraqi forces about how to do a rescue. They prayed some more and then called some friends in the American military. The U.S. forces supporting the Iraqis dropped a

curtain of smoke on their location, giving Eubank just enough time to dash across the 150 yards and rescue the girl. The next day, he returned to that location and saved seven more people. You can see videos of part of those rescues on YouTube if you Google “Dave Eubank rescue”.

Not as well known is that Eubank is the child of missionary parents and ministers with his wife and three children in battlegrounds. When asked by a reporter, “What on earth prompted you to do that?” he responded, “We pray about every decision we make as a family. God encouraged us to not be led by comfort or fear, but by the opportunities He gives ... There are families everywhere, also on the frontlines, so we want to be there as a family to comfort and reach out to other families, also to the women and children.” His ministry is much appreciated by the Muslim officers with whom he works, one of whom recently asked if he could pray for him before he returned to the U.S. on furlough. When he had finished praying, he said, “And I pray all this in Jesus’ name.” Eubank said: “You’re praying in Jesus’ name?” “Yes,” the officer said. “I like the sound of it.”

Pradyuman Pradhan came from a Hindu background and worshipped many idols and demonic spirits. At his house he kept an idol of the goddess Kali that he tried to please every day by performing rituals and offering up sacrifices. “I was also the leader of an anti-social group that is notorious for killing and inflicting harm on Christians,” he told an interviewer. “As long as I had the power, the villagers knew there would be no Christians in our village.” He had 200 men he could call upon to hunt down Christians and do them harm.

But then his brother Bhorat became a Christian. He had lost five sons, one after another. Overcome by his loss and deep grief, he landed in the arms of Jesus. Pradhan would have none of it. He confronted his brother at his home and asked him if he had become a Christian. “If this is true, our group will break down your house and you will have to leave our village.”

After making this threat, Pradhan was hit with some severe trials of his own. “I lost everything. My youngest daughter developed a serious health condition. I called a magician to my house, hoping he could help my girl. To my surprise, he told me that I was the one killing my own daughter with the power that I was wielding.” He became depressed, alcoholic and increasingly targeted Christians as an outlet for the anger inside him. But God confronted him in a vision one night and he heard the call of God on his life ... for God’s purposes. He told of his vision to a group of Christians who shared with him and prayed for his family, especially for his daughter, who was instantly healed. He gave his heart to Jesus.

Since that time, 17 years ago, Pradhan has endured a lot of persecution from the same sources that he used to lead. His daughter got sick again and died from her illness. But he has persevered in his faith, and has seen many people from his village become followers of Jesus.

Muhammad was a leader within ISIS and he heard that Peter was an evangelist to Muslims. He planned to execute Peter by deceiving him into thinking that he wanted to

become a Christian, and then looking for an opportunity to kill him. “When we met, he told me he wanted to believe in Christ,” Peter recounted. “But I felt something was wrong and, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, I began to speak to him very directly about the God of the Bible.” Muhammad began to tremble severely and Peter put his hand on the man’s shoulder and began to pray.

Only one or two nights later, Muhammad had a powerful dream about the blood of Jesus. He woke up the next morning shaken, and went to see Peter to understand more about Christ. That day he became a Christian and recently was baptized. After coming to faith in Jesus, he confessed to Peter that he was a prince of ISIS, someone that other members of ISIS swear allegiance to and will die for. He was planning to execute Peter and now treats him as one of his brothers.

Muhammad said of his conversion: “I was urging people toward jihad. But when I interacted with (the Christians) and heard the gospel, I experienced a love that doesn’t exist within Islam. This love compelled me to become a Christian and be baptized.” He is now leading a Bible study for Syrians in his town. Dr. Michael Youssef, who is the founder of an organization that reaches out to radical Muslims says this is one story of many. “What we are seeing God do is remarkable,” he says. “We are witnessing a powerful movement of God. The Lord is moving in unprecedented ways, and Muslims are coming to know Jesus in numbers previously considered impossible.”

You may have heard the statistics: there are more slaves in the world today than at any previous point in human history. That’s one of the reasons we are happy to support the ministry of International Justice Mission Canada as they work to free young girls from sex trade slavery in South-East Asia, or families from slavery in brick kilns in India. Here’s a story of a Christian response to slavery from the Dominican Republic.

Just 20 years ago, Father Christopher Hartley arrived on the beautiful island which hosts both the Dominican Republic and Haiti. He was shocked to discover that his new parish was occupied by slaves living in deplorable conditions and working 14 hours a day, 7 days a week, cutting sugar cane with machetes. Most of them are Haitians who have been dispossessed from their homes in Haiti and now work under armed guards without access to decent housing, electricity, clean water, education, healthcare or adequate nutrition. Father Hartley spoke up against the injustice he had witnessed, including in a speech before the President of the Dominican Republic and in meetings with the owners of the plantations. Because of his outspoken criticisms, he was treated harshly, threatened with death and eventually had to leave the country. But, inspired by the Gospels and by the example of Mother Teresa, he carried out intense efforts at evangelizing the plantation workers and brought the good news to many of these workers and their families whose plight is being ignored by most of the world. He has just released a book entitled Slaves in Paradise: A Priest Stands Up for Exploited Sugarcane Workers. His story is available in an online documentary called “The Price of Sugar” which you can view by searching it on Youtube.

This next story goes farther back for its starting point, but then gives some updates of where this move of God has progressed. The interior of Malaita in the Solomon Islands had a long history of opposition to missionaries and other outsiders. Many of them were killed by the Kwaio tribal group, but that didn't stop missionaries from Fiji risking their lives to bring the good news of God's love to these isolated tribal people. In 1990 several Fijian evangelists who had been part of a campaign to reach Fiji's 106 islands turned their attention to the 100 islands of the Solomon chain, 1000 miles away. They reached the island of Malaita and spent time evangelizing the coastal areas. One night as their team sat around a campfire, a team member pointed to the rugged interior of the island and asked, "Are there people there who have yet to hear about Jesus?" "Yes," one of the team replied. It's one of the most difficult areas in all of the islands to evangelize because of the rugged terrain and the hostile people."

After a lengthy discussion, the team finally agreed to pray and fast for even days before attempting to send a team to reach the Kwaios. With the help of two witch doctors who had become believers, a list of 87 different evil spirits were identified that were said to hold sway in the region and for seven days the team confronted those 87 different spiritual entities in focused prayer. On the eighth day, missionaries Jack and Japta joined 10 other Christian workers on a day-long journey into the rugged interior of the island.

About 5 in the afternoon they reached one village. There was a large gathering of people, indicating that something unusual was going on. The two men were quickly surrounded by large warriors who demanded to know who they were and why they had come. Jack explained as quickly as he could in the Kwaio language that they were bringing the Kwaio people good news.

It turned out that the village chief was on his death bed and they were refused permission to see him. Without the chief's acceptance of this new message, the rest of the villagers would never receive it. At one point, one of the team members told the elders that Jesus was quite capable of healing their chief and could they pray for him. They locked Jack and Japta in a hut for the night, and discussed what to do about this strange proposal. At seven the next morning the elders came with news: they would be allowed to pray for Chief Haribo. When they went in to the chief's hut, they saw him struggling for breath, and Jack shared quickly God's plan of salvation, explaining that Jesus was the only way to eternal life. The chief amazed them with his response: "I have waited my entire lifetime to hear this story. I have always felt there was some sacred message like this, but no one ever came to bring us such words. How can I receive this Jesus into my life? Jack and Japta led Chief Haribo in prayer and within a few minutes, a profound peace transformed his whole countenance. But, 2 hours later, he died.

For the rest of the day, his body was prepared for the traditional Kwaio burial. Meanwhile the mission team left the village and headed back to the coast. But as dusk descended, Chief Haribo sat up and began to speak! "Let the elders gather!" he said to his startled hearers. When they had assembled he related an amazing story about

seeing heaven. A being dressed in glorious white had taken him a great distance to the most beautiful place he had ever seen. A person called Jesus Christ, the Son of God the young men had told him about, was being worshiped by a huge crowd of people. Peace had come to his life, Haribo said, and he had no more pain, nor had he seen any suffering among the people who worshiped Jesus. The being in white told the chief he had to go back for a short time to tell the elders of the village that the message about Jesus was true. "This Jesus is the only way to experience eternal life," he said.

When the chief learned that Jack and Japta had left, he ordered runners to go after them and bring them back so they could preach to the rest of the village. When Jack and Japta returned they presented the message of salvation again, this time to the entire village. Every person, including Chief Haribo's immediate family of 21 members, received Christ as their Savior. And soon more than 300 villagers throughout the area, in 10 nearby villages, had decided to follow Jesus. The chief remained alive that night and into the next morning and then lay back down quietly and went to be with Jesus. Today, more than 8,000 Kwaios have become followers of Jesus, including 1,000 in the most remote areas.

These stories are all quite different. One man stays up at nights to pray for the people in his Buddhist village, another runs across a battle zone to rescue a girl trapped under the guns of ISIS, another stands up for the slaves who work the sugarcane fields in the Dominican Republic and others travel 1000 miles to share the gospel to people who have murdered other missionaries. Others are just there, bold in their love and their faith, sharing the gospel with Hindu militants and ISIS assassins. Each of these people had been changed by the love of God. My point: the world needs us, because only believers can share God's love.