

When one accepts a new call to a new congregation, there is a flurry of intense activity that only a handful of people know about, namely the new pastor and the pastor nominating committee. So, the morning after the PNC called me and indicated that they wanted to nominate me to Morningside, Martin Dunlap and I spoke to start dealing with nuts and bolts realities, things like paperwork and timing, one of the first things I said to Martin was, “I want to meet Joanna Adams. I’ve never met her and though we’ve spoken on the phone about other business, it’s really important to me that I get to sit down with her if her schedule permits.”

And so it was that two weeks later I was on the road down to Atlanta again for a whirlwind trip. We compared calendars came up with an hour that both of us were available, 9 a.m. on a Monday morning. So we met as colleagues and three and half hours later, we parted as friends. Our conversation covered the gamut, but there is one line that stood out to me so much that I asked her if I could share it with you.

It’s no secret that Morningside is a very different place now from ten years ago. Our membership has nearly quintupled and is growing. I’m told the physical plant is virtually unrecognizable from then. Giving to the church is as high as it as ever been. This is a congregation of generous people who share excitement and enthusiasm about being a part of what is going on here. I really wanted to understand what had happened here to create such an environment. It goes against virtually every trend in modern mainline Protestantism.

So I asked her, “Joanna, what happened at Morningside? What made the difference?”

Here's the line I couldn't forget. She looked at me and replied, "The secret ingredient at Morningside is hope."

She went on to add what I expect many of you already know, that it involved a lot of really hard work and good music, but that was the basic point.

As a teacher of preaching, Joanna would be suitably horrified if I didn't tell you that I share this not because we are talking about Morningside and Joanna, but by way of illustrating a larger point: the power of the gospel lies in the hope that it gives: a hope for redemption and transformation in the name of Jesus Christ.

You see, Matthew's version of the Gospel story ends with a call and it is a call that extends to every person who bears the name of Christ. And to be perfectly honest, it's a challenging call. "Go and make disciples of all nations!"

We hear those words every time we baptize a child of God, adult or infant. They are a mandate for each of us. Indeed, in our tradition, we recognize only two sacraments, the two specifically given to us by Jesus, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and this text is the basis for the sacrament of baptism.

It has had its share of misuse, of course. Some folks get uncomfortable talking about going and making disciples because we remember some of the less savory moments of the church's history where our efforts were hijacked. Baptism and discipleship can be conflated with nation-building and colonization and have been. But remember, that's just the misuse, where good and faithful people seeking to do good and faithful things found their efforts put to the wrong end. But the message that we've been given to share, the very stories we're supposed to tell aren't a story of the misuse of the word given us, but rather the story of its transformative power. The stories of the hope of the Gospel are the

stories that make us who we are, that give us the courage to step up and try new things, like *A Prairie Home Companion*'s Powdermilk Biscuits, "gives shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done."

If any of you are recoiling in horror at the reduction of the Gospel to a radio-show jingle, rest assured it is only to make this point: the call at the end of Matthew is to share the hope and transformation promised by Jesus. The mechanics aren't important, the message is.

So I'd like us to set aside the mechanics of exactly what making disciples looks like for just a minute. I suggest we set aside the concern for baptism for just a while. They're both important mechanics and we'll come back to them, but let's ask two questions of the text first. Those questions are, "who are all the nations from which we're to make disciples," and "What does it mean that Jesus is with us always?"

Who are these nations from which we are to make disciples? At an easy glance that sounds like we're supposed to identify countries to conquer with our evangelism. No wonder so many Christians shy away from this text. It looks a little bit like militarized Christianity, and frankly, if I told my neighbors I was going to work to make disciples of all nations, I'm not entirely sure they would be so keen on having me as a neighbor. But the translation in this instance doesn't quite capture the full meaning of the text. The word that we translate from Greek into English as nation is *ethnoi* and it means much more than the political identity of nations as we think of them. An *ethnoi* is more akin to an ethnicity, but even that doesn't quite capture it. It means *peoples*, both in a holistic sense, all the people, but also in the sense of an identity, a people.

So in this great charge at the end of Matthew, Jesus says “go and make disciples of all *ethnes*” and what he means by this is that this message is for everyone.

There is no one for whom the promise of the gospel is not meant.

Think of that. That’s a powerful message of hope. To all who are told by anyone that they aren’t welcome somewhere – anywhere, the words of Jesus stand and say, no, now you go and say to all the *ethnes* that *this* is for *them*. This is for them, for all of them. No matter who you are, no matter where you come from, no matter who has rejected you, no matter for what reason, this message, this promise is for you.

And what is the promise, what is this message, what is this hope?

“And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

To everyone, everywhere, Jesus sends his followers to say on his behalf, “I am with you, always.”

I am not going to lie to you, for me, that makes evangelism a whole lot easier to sell. Not that I’m selling a product, nor are you, but this wonderful word, evangelism, which is derived from the word evangel, just means good news. And this idea that Jesus is with us all, wants us all, values us all, sounds a lot more like good news to me than the idea that my task is to beat some member of another nation over the head with a bible and drag them by the feet to the font for baptism. It has a certain Neanderthal feeling about it – it’s inelegant.

I’m being flip of course, but I wonder at times whether that isn’t the sort of image we’re fighting, that to go and make disciples means that we have to somehow convince people they’re bad people first so that we can convince them that Jesus can make them good

people later. I'm not really sure what part of that would be good news. I'm not a hundred percent certain that I can call that hopeful.

But to go and tell people that there is a message that God loves them, that no matter who might be done with them now, that they matter to God, who is never, ever done with us - that's something I we can get into. That's hope that we can share.

That is very similar to the message that we heard from Isaiah today. I love that passage of Isaiah, the part about running and not being weary, walking without fainting.

(Incidentally, the cross country team at my high school used that on their sweatshirts.

I'm not entirely certain Isaiah meant it that way, but we'll chalk it up to enthusiasm.)

Isaiah spoke this word of encouragement to the people of Israel.

What's helpful to know about the book of Isaiah is that, while it is a pretty long book by biblical standards, it's really about three books with numerous authors. Scholars refer to first, second and third Isaiah in order to be a little more precise about who is writing and under what circumstances. In some ways it is not inaccurate to describe the story of the Old Testament as the rise, fall and redemption of God's people, Israel, and Isaiah walks through those latter events. The first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah describe the time leading up to their fall, the next fifteen describe the experience of the people being torn from their homeland and held in bondage by their oppressors. The final ten chapters tell the story of how God returned the people to their homes.

The fortieth chapter of Isaiah with its poignant poetic call, "have you not known, have you not heard?" stands at the beginning of Second Isaiah. The people are dispirited, they are dejected, everything that they hoped for seemed dashed. And into this miserable moment, into all of their feelings of rejection and failure and hopelessness comes this

promise for those who wait for the Lord, that they shall renew their strength, that they will rise up on wings as eagles – you remember the words, they shall walk and not faint. When they are at their lowest ebb, when they have reaped the harvest of what they have sown, into that very moment the word of the Lord comes with a word of redemption. I call that a gospel of hope.

You see, when we're called to go and tell and teach what Christ has commanded us, it's an invitation to go and share the hope of the world with the world that needs it. When hope is shared, it is a clarion sounding the words, "have you not known, have you not heard?"

It may seem simplistic to put it quite so bluntly, so tangibly, but I am convinced that when our Youth, along with Chris and their advisors went to Clifton Sanctuary last Sunday night to serve the dinner that was prepared by them and the dessert that Meredith and our double digits made on Sunday morning, that the experience was more than just breaking bread and sharing fellowship. It was a proclamation of hope, there's more, there are people who care: "have you not known, have you not heard?"

We will commission a mission team to return to Haiti next Sunday. I'm so glad we're doing that. I'm not sure I have the courage to go, but they do, and they'll go for all of us with their second suitcases full of what you bring and they'll return to the schools they visited last October and they'll share time together and they will, frankly, probably be fed as much spiritually as they will serve. And what will be proclaimed by the fellowship together and their work is simple. Together they and the students will hear the proclamation from God not so very long after their devastating earthquake, "have you not known? Have you not heard?"

You see, God is in the redemption business – that's the point of that call to us, that great commission, that we become the hands and feet and voice that God uses to send a great message of hope.

You see when our first concern is with giving hope, with spreading the Gospel message that God isn't done with us, that God is never done with us, that every one of us has value and merit in God's sight, and therefore everyone of us has value and merit in the church's sight, when we're bringing truly *good* news, discipleship and baptism follow.

That's sort of the opposite of having tell people they're bad people so that we can tell them later that Jesus will make them better.

You never know when God's call to you is going to be to extend the hand of hope on Christ's behalf so that God's redemption will be made known. Are you looking? Are you listening? Are you prepared?

I heard Joanna tell a wonderful story in an Easter sermon years ago and I'd like to close with it today. It seems that a visiting schoolteacher who worked in a hospital was asked by the classroom teacher of a little boy to go and visit him in the hospital and help him with his homework. The classroom teacher said to the visiting teacher, "We are studying nouns and adverbs in this young man's class, and I hope you will help him."

When the visiting teacher arrived at the hospital, she was dismayed to discover that the child was in the hospital's burn unit in very serious condition and experiencing great pain. She was embarrassed when she walked in the room and saw him in his state of misery, but she decided to press on and stumbled through the lesson, ashamed of herself for putting him through such a senseless exercise. The next morning, the nurse on the burn unit said to the teacher, "What did you do to that boy yesterday?" Before the

teacher could get out her apology, the nurse said, "We had given up on him, but ever since you visited him, he seems to be fighting back, responding to treatment."

The boy himself later explained that he had given up hope, but it all changed when he had come to the simple realization that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?

"O, the power of hope," Joanna said, "Tell the others, He is risen! On the other side of pain and death is always resurrection. Across even the darkest shadows of life, there shines a light that will never fail."

The power of hope indeed! Into a world where sometimes the way seems closed, sometimes rejection seems eminent, the clarion call repeats to everyone, to absolutely everyone: "have you not known? Have you not heard?"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.