

Message: Trick or Treat?

What’s the scariest thing for a Christian? I think that’s a good question on the Sunday before Halloween. It’s a trick or treat kind of question. There is one thing Christians fear more than anything else.

I think you know what it is: evangelism.

Take the fear of speaking in public, add our fear of telling someone what we really think about Jesus, and mix that in the cauldron of doubt and uncertainty and – presto! We want to run away – fast!

We miss a blessing when we do. God calls us to witness to our faith. The Lord spoke to Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, David and all the prophets. Luke records Jesus’ parting words, *“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). That’s the mission Jesus gave to us.

We’re called to follow Jesus in this way. It isn’t a trick. It’s a treat. So let’s spend some time together looking at what it means to be a witness, to tell others about Jesus. Let’s begin with the “E” word itself: evangelism. Sometimes we call it outreach or sharing or relationship building. It’s all those things and more. We think of it as the “trick.”

Why does evangelism get such a bad rap today? Well, there are lots of people who are abusing it. We’ve all seen signs like these, where people are taking a particular position on a particular topic. When you see one of these signs, do you feel encouraged or inspired? No! Scare tactics, coercion, and “bad news with an escape clause” have become synonymous with evangelism. That’s sad. It’s short-sighted and misguided. Jesus never used any of these approaches.

Maybe we’re confused about what we’re supposed to do.

Evangelism isn’t a synonym for conversion. It isn’t a single event focused on people making a decision for Christ. That view creates tension between people who follow Jesus and those who don’t. That tension isn’t unusual. It makes us reluctant to get involved.

Author Mark Teasdale argues that setting evangelism up to make a decision leads us to an “either/or” conclusion: either you’re with me and you convert, or you aren’t and you fail. That’s polarizing, not uniting or inviting. We need to move away from presenting our own experience of faith as an either/or proposition. We’re sharing God’s love with the hope that people will accept it. We aren’t condemning or judging people. We’re inviting others to consider and be inspired by the good news of Jesus.¹ That’s an act of love.

Evangelism is good news. It’s a “treat.” Evangelism is the good news of God’s healing and saving love in Jesus. It’s not a program about membership recruitment or increasing budgets. The very meaning of the word is proof of that.

The word evangelism comes from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον which is written as euaggelion. Phonetically, it’s yoo-ang-ghel'-ee-on. It’s translated as “good news” or “good message.” The word gospel is derived from it. If you didn’t know it, when we say “the Gospel of Mark” what we’re also saying is “the good message of Mark.”

That means anyone who shares Jesus’ story, sayings and actions with other people is ... *drum roll* ... God’s messenger. You’re an evangel, like angels. If you’ve sung “Jesus loves you” with children, you’re a messenger. If you’ve read the Christmas story to others, you’re a messenger. If you’ve prayed for someone “In Jesus’ name ...”, you got it – you’re a messenger. If you’ve put Christmas lights or a nativity scene in your front yard – you’re a messenger. Like “the internet”, the word evangelism is fuzzy. We’ve managed to make sharing a good message into something we want to avoid at all costs.

There’s another, important aspect of the message. Jesus calls us to be witnesses (Acts 1:8). He asks us to give testimony, like we were in court. If you testify in court, you swear an oath to “tell the truth, the whole truth, so help me God.” Then we tell our part of the story, as we know it. We don’t make things up. We don’t tell other people’s stories.

¹ Mark Teasdale, *Evangelism for Non-Evangelists: Sharing the Gospel Authentically*, Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2016, pp. 33-34

We don't change our story to fit someone else's view. We tell the people listening what happened in our own life, from our perspective.

That's what Jesus asks us to do. Tell others how he's part of our life. We don't make things up. We don't have to try to explain things we don't understand. We just share why we believe in Jesus and what it means to us, in our own words, our own way and our own time.

Why is it important to be a messenger? It's not a duty or obligation. It's a privilege. And it's the mission of people who assemble each week to praise and show love for God. We're fulfilling the mission Jesus began by coming to earth. It's how we invite others to join us, to become part of Jesus' story, to become part of our story.

Why make disciples? Disciples live in a way that's different from any culture in the world. Disciples aren't bound by Jewish culture, American culture, Western culture, Caucasian culture, male culture, wealth culture or even heterosexual culture. Disciples believe ALL of us are loved by God, no matter what. Disciples believe in the mission to tell everyone. Grace and love win – read the end of the book and see!

There is one question you may have: what is the good news that Jesus shared? The first proclamation of the good news is found in Luke's letter, where Jesus recites a lesson from Isaiah:

*“God's Spirit is on me;
he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, “This is God's year to act!” (Luke 4:18-19).*

That's a good message. Following Jesus gives our lives meaning, purpose and fullness. We live with hope, joy and a faith that can't be lost. It's a blessing and a privilege to share that message by way we live. It's a message Esperanza and I want to share. We invite you to join us. Let's reclaim the practice, even if we don't like using the “E” word.

What kind of messenger are you? We provided profiles of six styles: the direct style, intellectual style, storytelling style, personal style, invitational style or serving style. The questionnaire will help you see which of the styles you’re gifted with.

Once we know how God has equipped us to connect with other people, we need to practice. Very few people are naturals, but we’re all able. Remember, all you’re looking to do is share your own story without expecting the other person to respond.

We provided a list of six “conversation starters.” Try them out. In fact, I invite you all to try this together. Choose one of the conversation starters. Got it? Now, take about thirty seconds to fill in the blank in your head. Done? Here comes the fun part. Turn to a person seated near you and share with them your response. Then wait for the other person to respond. Each person should share. You don’t have to do anything more than that. This should take about a minute or two.

Ready? Go. Guess what?

You’re one of God’s messengers! Congratulations.

Now, let’s go do it again.

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for coming to save us from the many things that frighten, depress and anger us. That’s good news the whole world needs! You know our reluctance. You’ve seen the harsh, misguided ways some have gone about sharing your message of love and peace. Give us the courage to be your messengers of love and peace, making a difference in this world and in our own lives. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Isaiah 43:10-12 (CEB)

You are my witnesses, says the LORD,
my servant, whom I chose,
so that you would know and believe me
and understand that I am the one.

Before me no god was formed;
after me there has been no other.

I, I am the LORD,
and there is no savior besides me.

I announced, I saved, I proclaimed,
not some stranger among you.

You are my witnesses, says the LORD,
and I am God.

2 Corinthians 5:13-20 (CEB)

If we are crazy, it’s for God’s sake. If we are rational, it’s for your sake. The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: one died for the sake of all; therefore, all died. He died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised.

So then, from this point on we won’t recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn’t how we know him now. So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people’s sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation.

So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ’s representatives, “Be reconciled to God!”