

I don't often talk about the national church body this church belongs to. Some of you know it's called the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. You can probably guess why I don't mention it. How many people in Oklahoma really care about something in Wisconsin? Evangelical is a big word that means gospel centered. Lutheran connects us with the history of the Reformation going back to the 15th century. The last word, synod, is maybe least known of all. Synod is based on a Greek word meaning walking together.

Synod really describes our national church body of 1,287 churches with 389,545 baptized members. We've walked together to support four schools for ministerial education to train pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. We walk together with 328 Lutheran elementary schools and 388 early childhood centers teaching 34,319 students. Walking together we're involved in 26 international mission fields serving 107,850 souls. We might only be the third largest Lutheran church in America, but we're getting things done.

You're part of all that. Your money and prayers help support that. Yet with a huge network of churches, missions, and schools spread across this country, with varying locations and people how can we accomplish anything? Shouldn't we limit ourselves so we don't fail? Only go after certain people at certain times and places. This morning Isaiah is going to speak against that notion. Instead we proclaim...

**Jesus is the light of all we do
He shines through his Word
He shines to the ends of the earth**

When reading Isaiah's prophecy it's important to always question who the author is talking about in any given section. In the first lesson for today we're left with a few options. First, might the author be talking about himself? **"Listen to me, you islands."** That's not likely because nowhere do we get the author is trying to focus on himself. Second, could this be talking about Israel the nation? **"He said to me, you are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."** Israel was supposed to do all the things mentioned in these verses, but they didn't. They blew it. They're not being talked about here. Finally, is this talking about the Christ?

Jesus is splashed all over the Old Testament. He's God's servant promised from the beginning. He wasn't sent right away though. **"In the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver."** Jesus was prepared for use, but only at the right time. God concealed this polished arrow, hid him, and reserved him for the proper time. Even when he sent him his work seemed in vain. Jesus was killed on a cross. But Jesus was still God's secret weapon. His weapon of choice was his Word.

You've probably had someone tell you the Bible is confusing or it's all in how you interpret it. Is that really true? Are we Wisconsin Synod Lutherans just one group among many because we interpret the Bible our own specific way? Consider what Paul says in 2 Timothy, **"This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."** What's confusing about that? God's Word, the message about Jesus, is clear in any language. Its God's Word, and through that Word shines Christ Jesus our Savior.

We walk together in a big and spread out group. Yet we might think that tools used in Palm Coast Florida at Christ the King Lutheran Church would not be the same as in Yakima Washington at Grace Lutheran Church. The culture and people are totally different. Each congregation has different gifts. The WELS connection videos we watch show things happening all over, but sometimes might we think those could never work here. Some we've tried and they haven't worked or won't work because of our part of the country. We've got our own ideas: our own Fall Family Festival, our own way of Sunday school, and our own Vacation Bible School. We design each to appeal to someone, get someone through the doors, and then we can claim success.

It doesn't matter if we're talking Florida, Washington State, or Oklahoma, the tool is exactly the same. **"Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword."** That sword refers to the Word of God. Everywhere in our church body you go will use that Word of God to get its message across. That message centers on Christ who is the Word made flesh. This is God's not-so-secret weapon to bring people back from the brink of death. This is God's weapon sent at just the right time and revealed to us in our time. It's the message carefully planned before the beginning of the world. God didn't throw this together. Jesus was prepared, Jesus was called, and Jesus shines through the Word.

We must work to keep that Word the center of what we do. If we ever rest and think our congregation could never lose the Word we're in danger. We must maintain dedication to teaching the next generation about its importance. If we fail, the Word might be lost forever. On a synod level we must always be checking our leaders to see their dedication to the Word. Every direction our synod takes must be matched up to remain faithful to that Word.

In my exit interview the seminary president asked if I'd be willing to serve overseas. I'm thinking every seminary graduate said the same thing. I had been trained with the Word of God and I felt God had prepared me to serve wherever he wanted me. If that meant overseas I would go. I of course wasn't sent overseas but right here to Oklahoma. But others did go overseas. We each were taught the same Word, but Jesus needs to shine to the ends of the earth.

God is big, and his plan to save people is big. The Jews didn't have the market cornered on salvation, as if the Messiah were just for them. Christ Jesus came to save both Jews and Gentiles. **"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles..."** 700 years before Christ came into this world that was always the plan. The gospel would be shared with people to the ends of the earth.

Failures and setbacks hamper our efforts to share the gospel with even a small number of people. 1000 postcards or 500 door hangers are sent out and no one responds. They cost money and the postage wasn't completely volunteered. Some might want limits because our return on investment doesn't seem great. With no results we get impatient and think our efforts have failed. That makes us want to limit ourselves even more. Christ looked like a failure too when he died. But Jesus didn't limit himself because of a poor return on investment. He was restoring Israel and winning a new future for all people including Gentiles. That's us! His cross is the light that penetrates the darkest corners of our hearts. Our sinful desires are destroyed in that penetrating light of Christ. Jesus shines into our lives but he needs to shine even further.

Our mission on a church and synod level must be this section of Isaiah, the so called great commission of the Old Testament. That's a reminder of the mission Christ gave the church in the New Testament. **"Go and make disciples of all nations..."** It's the work Christ wants us to do. This world is big and we've got a big Savior. We can do home mission work around us. We can join with others in our church body to do mission work in other countries. We can even extend our reach by helping support our synod train pastors, teachers, and missionaries to serve in our place. We can encourage our young people to consider that field and pray for more workers on the whole. This is work our Savior wants done and he promises to bless it.

The work of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is simple, proclaim Christ crucified. The Word of God is the tool given to all to accomplish that work. The gospel isn't limited in scope or in power. It's meant for all people to the ends of the earth. The Word of God centers on Christ who is salvation for everyone who believes. He's the light of all we do as a congregation here in Oklahoma City, as a church walking together with other churches in the United States, and walking together to touch the ends of the earth.