

Sermon – Sunday, July 3, 2022

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We're all familiar with the concept of advance teams. Advance teams go ahead of the political candidate or celebrity and prepare everything for the candidate's arrival. They make sure the event site is properly prepared, crowds will be on hand to greet the arrival, and publicity has been done. In short, they handle all the details of preparing the site and community for the arrival of the celebrity.

In the Gospel, we have an example of early advance teams. Seventy people are sent out two by two to all the towns Jesus plans to visit to prepare the hearts of folks in that town to receive the message Jesus will deliver. These teams are to deliver the message of shalom that Jesus brings. Shalom is more than just peace, but it refers to a sense of completeness, wholeness, and the absence of any agitation or discord. Jesus brings shalom to all those whose hearts are prepared. The disciples' job was to introduce that concept and prepare the hearts of people for Jesus.

Our job as disciples of Jesus is the same. We are to be advance men and women. We are to prepare the hearts of those we meet to encounter the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, which Jesus left with us when He ascended, brings that shalom. God calls some people out to precede the Holy Spirit in other towns or countries as missionaries, similar to his calling of the 70. But, more often, God's call to us is more like the call to Naaman's wife's servant girl. The call is to recognize that others need the healing God offers and tell them where they can find it. We're called to do that even if the person who needs healing has done something wrong to us, like Naaman, who defeated the Israelites in battle and enslaved the Israelite girl. We're called to prepare the hearts of our enemies and our friends for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The call to do this precedes our desire to see them punished, our anxieties about sharing our faith, or our preference to do something else with our time.

Frequently throughout the year, weekly lections touch on the theme of our call to evangelism – our call to prepare hearts for God. Yet, we struggle with answering this call. We know we fall short of meeting this call because if we did accept the call, we'd have new people visit our churches just about every week. They'd be coming in response to the advance work we'd done.

We don't fall short of meeting this call because we're bad people. I believe we fall short for three reasons:

1. We think everyone already knows about Jesus and would embrace him if they wanted. So, we don't see a need for us to provide any extra information.
2. We are often short of words to say. We fear we'll say something wrong or stupid. After all, we're not trained theologians.
3. We fear rejection.

Perhaps the person will think less of us or feel we are being too personal by telling them about Jesus. But, we'd recommend a good marriage counselor if we saw their marriage was shaky or recommend a good oncologist if we knew they had cancer. Why not recommend the universal healer as well?

Today, we will have an opportunity to prepare ourselves to be an advance man or woman for at least one needy person to open their hearts to God.

So, you have a pencil and paper. I'd like you to write down the name of someone you know who could use the shalom that God offers. Perhaps this person is an atheist; maybe they believe in something but haven't acted on it. Perhaps they are a Christian already but aren't necessarily in touch with God right now. I invite us to take a minute and jot down that name.

Now, I would like you to think of one time when you needed shalom, and God gave that to you. It could be a time when another person helped you, you received an answer to a prayer, or you experienced something miraculous. I invite us to take a minute and jot down a word or phrase that prompts us to talk about that time with this person.

OK, now we have a person we'd like to reach and a personal experience of God we can share with them. We need one more thing to be ready to be an advance woman or man. We need to have a place or time when we will talk to this person and share our story. I invite us to take a minute and jot down a place or time when we will share our story with this person.

I now invite us to commit to answering the call to reach out to this person and share our story so that we can prepare their heart for a close encounter with Jesus. Then we pray for the Holy Spirit to do their work with this person. God doesn't make us responsible for whether or not the person accepts the invitation we provide them. However, God does make us accountable for telling the story of how God has made us whole.

We are called to be advance people, preparing the hearts of others to receive the shalom of Jesus. We have all we need to answer this call. We have our own stories. When we answer the call to share our stories, we help others in a profound way. We will also see new people come into our church to learn more about this awesome Jesus we have.